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KING DANDY SENT THE AGED TILES OF THE TWO BUMMERS FLYING FROM THEIR HEADS.

King Dandy, THE SILVER SPORT;

OR,

The High Kicker of Salt River.

A Romance of Silverland.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,

AUTHOR OF "OVERLAND KIT," "THE FRESH OF
FRISCO," "THE WOLVES OF NEW YORK,"
"THE VELVET HAND," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

AN ATTACK IN FORCE.

"Now, gents, before we come to real, right-down bloody business, we want to have a talk with these men over yonder so as to let 'em know jest how things are."

It was burly John Kellerhan, an Arizonian sheriff, who spoke, and the speech was addressed to a motley lot of men, none of whom were without arms.

It is of Silverland we write—of arid, rugged, romantic Arizona, and the particular spot, a mining-camp on the head-waters of Salt River—one of the principal branches of the Gila, the marvelous stream which all early adventurers believed to flow over golden sands.

Crested Hill the camp was called, situated in a pleasant little valley, a few miles to the eastward of the White Mountain Apache Indian Reservation.

The camp derived its name from the fact that on the north a high bluff, whose summit was adorned with a dozen or so of scrubby pines, threw its shadow down upon the valley.

The settlement was a new one, hardly a year old, but as the surrounding country was rich in both gold and silver veins and "outcrops," where the common miner with his rude tools could make good wages, the camp prospered.

Some few mills had been erected and all were doing well.

The best "strike," though, according to report, was the Red Elephant, a mine about a mile from the center of the town, and it was in regard to the men in possession of the Red Elephant that the sheriff uttered the sentence with which we commence our tale.

It was the old story: The original discoverers of the lode hadn't money enough, and so the mine was "bonded," and a stock company formed. Then the stockholders, believing they had a good thing, commenced to quarrel, and formed cliques, each one of which desired to oust the others, and so gain entire control of the property.

Then "the law" was invoked, and, as usual, the litigation ruined all the parties; whereupon strangers came forward and bought up the concern.

A resolute young Scotch-American, one Alexander Murray, represented the new owners, and now at the head of a fine body of armed men, with the sheriff as the representative of the law, he had come to take possession of the property.

The original discoverer and locator of the mine, a Mexican adventurer called Michael Fronteras, held the premises.

Utterly ruined by the law-proceeding, and conceiving that he had been foully dealt with, this Mexican had collected a party of desperadoes, and proclaimed his resolve not to surrender the mine until he received something for his priority claim.

Murray, who was a good-hearted fellow, persuaded his associates that it would be better to give the Mexican a "stake" rather than have trouble; but when they came to negotiate and found that Fronteras had decided not to take less than ten thousand dollars, it was resolved to take the property from him by the strong arm of the law.

Hence, on this pleasant May morning, John Kellerhan, the sheriff, and Alexander Murray, with a force of twenty well-armed men at their back, came down upon the Red Elephant.

Intelligence of the raid had spread abroad despite efforts to keep it quiet, and, as a natural consequence, almost everybody for twenty miles around was on hand to see the expected "fun."

When the armed force approached, long before they got within rifle-range, the Mexican and the hang-dog-looking fellows, whom he had hired to assist him in holding the mine, appeared in the doorway of the stamp-mill.

These men were all strangers, "Greasers" from New Mexico, who had been imported across the border by Fronteras. It was the general impression that they were cut-throats of the first water.

The Mexican, Fronteras, was not a favorite with the men of Crested Hill. He was of an ugly disposition, and had been engaged in quite a number of quarrels since the founding of the town; therefore he had gained the reputation of being a "bad man," and, as a consequence,

in this fight public sentiment was decidedly in Murray's favor.

"Certainly, Mr. Sheriff," replied Murray, to bluff John Kellerhan's speech; "by all means speak to them and see if we cannot get possession of the property in a peaceable way. I don't want any trouble, and am the last man in the world to cause it."

"Possibly, now that Fronteras sees that we are in dead earnest, and have force enough to take and hold the mine, he may be inclined to listen to reason."

The sheriff shook his head.

"I don't take much stock in that," he replied.

"I know Mike Fronteras like a book! He is an ugly, bull-headed customer, and I have allers sed, ever since I knowed him, that he would die with his boots on. Howsumever, a leetle chin-music won't do no harm, and if he wants a fight arter it, we kin sock it to him!"

The sheriff, producing a white handkerchief, waved it above his head, as a flag of truce, and advanced toward the Red Elephant works.

"Don't fire, boys!" commanded the Mexican, as the sheriff came forward. "Let's hear what he has to say."

Kellerhan halted when he got within a hundred feet of the Mexicans and delivered a temperate, well-considered speech.

As the representative of the law he had come to put Mr. Murray in possession of the Red Elephant property—had force sufficient to do it, and, therefore, advised that no fruitless resistance be made.

Fronteras, who was a burly, black-bearded fellow, of dark and forbidding aspect, replied, briefly:

"This property is *mine* and I will hold it, law or no law, until the bottomless pit freezes over!"

"Your blood will be upon your own head, then!" warned Kellerhan, turning to depart.

"Go to blazes!" was the defiant reply of the Mexican.

The sheriff rejoined his party, and within five minutes the assault began.

As the attackers rushed on, the Mexican and his men opened fire.

Kellerhan, an old hand at this game, had deployed his men in a skirmish line, so that no random shot would be apt to do damage.

The sheriff himself was a fine rifle-shot, and seeing that the Mexican "meant business," he brought his Winchester to shoulder, glanced a moment along the shining barrel and then discharged the weapon.

Kellerhan hoped by a single shot to put an end to the fight, for Fronteras, disabled or killed, his followers would not keep up the conflict.

Fronteras was hit—badly too, as was apparent—for he staggered forward, dropped his repeating-rifle, smoking from the recent discharges, clutched at his breast with both hands, then fell, face downward, to the ground.

The moment he fell, the sheriff and his men sprung forward with a yell, and the desperadoes, understanding that the game was up, threw down their arms and cried for quarter.

The sheriff was the first to reach the side of the stricken man. Kneeling, he turned the Mexican upon his back, so that his scowling face looked up at the sky.

"Stone dead!" Kellerhan cried, and for a moment his face wore a troubled look, for he knew full well that it was his bullet which had done the fatal work.

Hardly had the words escaped his lips when another actor—or actress rather—appeared upon the scene—a gloriously beautiful, Cleopatra-like girl of eighteen or twenty, mounted upon a handsome, brown mare. She was attired in a well-fitting riding-habit, and was evidently a lady by birth and breeding.

A prey to anxious excitement she rode at full speed to where the Mexican lay dead, and flung herself from the saddle.

Those who had gathered around the death-stricken man, respectfully made way for her.

"Oh, heavens! I am too late!" she cried, as she looked upon the fallen man and comprehended that Fronteras was indeed dead.

"Who has done this bloody deed?"

And as she put the question her eyes fell upon the face of Murray who stood opposite to her, on the other side of the body.

The girl gave a gasp of recognition.

"Alexander Murray!" she exclaimed. "Is it possible that you are the Murray who has persecuted my poor brother so cruelly?"

"Your brother?" Murray cried in surprise.

"Yes, my half-brother—the son of my mother by her first husband, but I loved him as dearly as though he was my own brother. You have killed him, and to me you must answer for the deed, for, as sure as there is a heaven above, I swear that I, Oriana Marshal, will avenge this cruel murder!"

She spoke like one inspired—a savage prophetess, who would not be denied.

All stared in amazement, and then, with the air of a tragedy queen, she swung herself into her saddle and rode off in the direction of Crested Hill.

"Well, gents, you kin bet yer boots this beats my time," the sheriff observed, in evident trepidation.

CHAPTER II.

THE STRANGER.

THE annoyance of Murray was manifest.

Little wonder, too, for he had made the lady's acquaintance in New York—had fallen a victim to her charms, and one of his day-dreams, when he embarked in this wild, Western adventure, was, that after acquiring a fortune, he would be free to return and marry the beautiful girl who had ensnared him.

There had been no engagement between the two, nor any particular understanding, but Oriana had plainly shown that she preferred him to all her other suitors, therefore he felt well satisfied that, when the time came for him to press his suit, the answer would be a favorable one.

But this unforeseen and untoward event had transformed the girl from a sweetheart into an enemy, and his dream of future bliss had been rudely interrupted.

Murray's reverie was broken by the voice of the sheriff.

"Well, the thing is all settled now," Kellerhan observed. "Thar won't be any appeal in this case, and the Red Elephant property is yours, now, for sure."

"Yes; there is no doubt about that," Murray returned, rousing himself, with an effort, from his abstraction. "I suppose the body had better be carried to the hotel, as the lady will want to attend to the details of the funeral."

"All right; I will attend to it," Kellerhan replied. "I am sorry that the row occurred, of course, but it wasn't our fault. The law must take its course, and folks wot don't want to git hurt must keep out of the way of the procession."

So, while Murray and his men took possession of the mine, the sheriff had the body removed to the hotel, where, as had been anticipated, the lady took refuge.

She had brought letters of introduction to the proprietor of the hotel, and he and his wife made her as comfortable as possible.

About all the spectators of the contest had flocked into the camp, so that the town took on the appearance which it presented on a holiday, the single street of the town being well-filled with groups of gossiping men.

After the body of Fronteras had been carried into the hotel, public attention was directed to a stranger who presented such a strange appearance that almost every eye was fixed upon him.

He was making his way on foot to the camp of Crested Hill, approaching the town by the trail from old Fort Tulerosa in New Mexico, and which passed directly by the Red Elephant Mine, and as he chanced to come along at the moment when the sheriff ordered the advance he witnessed the fracas and drifted after the citizens into the camp.

Little wonder that he attracted the gaze of all eyes, for the camp of Crested Hill had never seen the like of such a sharp before, although since the town had had a "local habitation and a name," it had been visited by many dashing sports.

This man was no ordinary adventurer, plainly, but a sharp of high degree.

He was about the medium height, muscularly built, had a well-shaped head and a frank, open face. His features were regular, although the jaw was massive enough to betoken tenacity of the bulldog kind. His eyes, clear dark-gray in color, eagle-like eyes, lit up the intelligent and expressive face.

A drooping, tawny mustache fringed his resolute mouth, otherwise the face was cleanly shaven.

But the odd thing about the man's appearance, apart from his peculiar dress, was his hair, which was of so light a tint of yellow as to appear almost white, and it was worn in long ringlets which, carelessly brushed back off the ears, descended to his shoulders.

No boarding-school belle, careful of and proud of her fresh young charms, could boast of finer curls.

In person the stranger looked as neat as though he had just come from the hands of a tailor.

His pantaloons and coat—he wore no vest—were of brown corduroy, and although, on a close inspection, signs of wear could be discerned, yet at a distance they looked much like new.

The shirt was elaborately ruffled, and a stout leather belt girded his supple waist, supporting a couple of holsters in which reposed a pair of silver-plated revolvers, navy size, and which looked as if they could be depended upon to do effective work, while a ten-inch bowie-knife, a most formidable weapon, kept the pistols company.

The silver-like locks of the stranger were crowned by a cream-colored felt hat, with a broad, rolling brim and a high crown, dented in the center, the Burnside pattern, so popular during the war.

In his hand the unknown carried a small switch, and as he came into the camp with a careless, jaunty air, carrying his head as high as though he was a man of renown, he lightly

tapped his muscular, well-formed legs with the switch.

Arriving in front of the hotel, he halted and surveyed the hostelry as though deliberating whether the place was good enough to afford him accommodation or not.

As said, the citizens were gaping at this stranger, for such a "pilgrim" was no common sight in the camp of Crested Hill. But the new-comer did not appear to notice this scrutiny, and had marched up the street with as much unconcern as though there wasn't another soul but himself on the thoroughfare.

The opinion of the citizens in regard to the stranger differed widely. The old heads believed him to be a sharp—a man who went about "seeking whom he might devour," while the greenhorns, and the "common, vulgar herd," jumped to the conclusion that the fellow was a tenderfoot out of whom some fun might be extracted.

Acting on this idea, two of the worst bummers in the town, after exchanging words on the subject, advanced and accosted the unknown.

One of these men was short and fat—Jimmy Duck was his "handle"—and because he was a gross, fat fellow, he was facetiously dubbed Slim Jim.

His companion was tall and thin, gaunt and scarecrow-like, and, though a young man, dissipation had left its marks upon him, so he appeared prematurely aged, and as he always looked as solemn as a mute at a funeral, in the same spirit of contradiction which affixed the appellation of Slim Jim to the fat bummer, the miners called this melancholy individual Happy Johnny Boker.

The two were pards, always traveled in company, and which was the greater scamp of the pair it would have been hard to say.

They were the butts of the camp, and on account of the amusement which they furnished, the citizens submitted to their small swindles in the way of ringing in with the crowd for drinks and more solid refreshments.

Slim Jim and Happy Johnny Boker possessed the only two high hats the camp could boast of.

Extremely venerable, well-worn tiles they were, too. Slim Jim's had once been white, but it was sadly discolored now, while Happy Johnny Boker's was black, of the style which, in the large Eastern cities, usually makes its appearance once a year in the St. Patrick's Day parade.

Bold as braves the two bummers sauntered up to the stranger.

"How are ye?" cried Slim Jim, striking an attitude. "Durned ef I ain't glad to see ye. How did ye leave all the folks in old Missouri?"

"Shet yer yawp!" cried Happy Johnny Boker at this point. "This gent ain't no pike from Missouri, nary time. He's an old side-pard of mine, and down in Memphis, in the glorious State of Tennessee, we used to run the town."

"Get out, you fraud!" Slim Jim cried, vociferously. "You don't know this gen'lman from a side of sole-leather. He's from Missouri I tell yer and his name is Tommy Cheeseit."

"You are a double-distilled liar and a goat thief!" howled Happy Johnny Boker, equally vociferously. "I knew this hyer gen'lman afore you were born. His name is Bobby Tickleme, and he is from Memphis, 'way-down in Tennessee."

The bystanders had begun to collect in the neighborhood, anxious to see how the stranger would receive this welcome, and on many of their faces was a broad grin.

"Well, we won't fight over the matter, though I have waded up to my knees in the gore of a man for saying less than w'ot you jest spit out," Slim Jim declared, with great dignity; "an' as I see that my old pard hyer is anxious for to take us in and set up the drinks, we'll say no more about it."

"Gentlemen, your prognosis is at fault. No pard am I of either of you two bummers!" the stranger exclaimed. "Not from Missouri, nor from Memphis do I come, but I am the bounding gazelle of the old Blue Ridge, in ole Virginny never tire. I'm the Silver Sport of the Shenandoar, the High Kicker of the Rappahannock, King Dandy, hoop-la, hi!"

Then, with wonderful agility he bounded up in the air and, first with one foot, then with the other, sent the ag'd tiles of the two bummers flying from their heads, kicking them off apparently without the least trouble.

The bystanders stared in amazement. Such a feat had never before been witnessed in that camp, and evidently the two bummers literally had "caught a Tartar."

They seemed to realize that fact, for they hastened to pick up their hats, glad of an excuse to get away from the stranger sharp.

Perfectly impassive, and without the least notice of the grinning crowd, the sport crossed the street, entered the hotel and putting down a ten-dollar gold-piece upon the counter before the host, announced that he intended to tarry awhile with him.

In the frontier hotel it is always cash in advance.

CHAPTER III.

THE CAMP BY NIGHT.

CRESTED HILL, although as dull as the average country village in the daytime, was a regular young metropolis in appearance after the shades of night descended upon the earth, for although the camp could only boast of about a hundred inhabitants, clustered in the little valley on the banks of Salt River, yet there were fully five hundred men within ten miles of the town, scattered here and there, in little camps in the mountain gulches, and all of these made Crested Hill their headquarters.

When the day's toil was over they flocked into the town, so the resident population of a hundred was swollen to three or four hundred at night.

The hotel—kept by a long, lanky Kentuckian, Jared Somerset by name, and which, in honor of his native State, he called the "Old Kentucky Home"—was the general lounging-place, for there all the news of the day was to be heard.

After the hotel, the principal resort was the leading saloon, a large, one-storied shanty, situated at the northern end of the town, run by a jolly Englishman, one William Bendigo, but who was generally called London Bill, from the habit he had of lugging into his conversation a reference to the English capital whenever he possibly could.

The London Arms was the name that the Englishman had applied to his saloon, but the miners did not understand the "Arms" part of the title, and generally dropped that when they spoke of the place, calling it the "London Shebang," or "London Bill's Crib."

Like the majority of places of its character in the West, the saloon comprised both a bar, where all sorts of drinks could be had, a lunch-counter, devoted to light refreshments, where, for a quarter, one could get quite a little meal, all coarse, cheap food, but still enough to stay a man's stomach, and a gambling department in which the seeker for a royal road to fortune could try his luck at all sorts of games.

And, as an additional attraction, London Bill had, in the rear part of the building, a small stage, about thirty feet square, upon which was a regular twenty-four foot ring of stakes and ropes.

This was the "magic circle," dear to the hearts of the pugilistic fraternity.

Always termed a circle or ring, although in reality it is square.

Bendigo was a retired pugilist, and claimed to be a descendant of the renowned fighter of that name, who once held so prominent a position in English sporting circles.

Attached to his establishment were two boxers, both "imported stock;" one a man of about a hundred and thirty pounds, and the other a "heavy weight," scaling a hundred and eighty odd.

The first was called Joe Murphy, but his "professional" name was Dublin Tricks, and the second, Tom Benjamin, was more often termed the Birmingham Infant, than addressed by his own proper appellation.

These two gave an exhibition of the "manly art of self-defense," known to the profession as the science of "jab, stop and get away," every evening.

Of course it was rather a one-sided affair for the Infant was far too powerful for his adversary; but, although to the spectators the pair appeared to be doing their best to annihilate each other, yet, in reality, they were only playing fight, and their resounding whacks were not calculated to do much damage.

But after their bout was over the fun began, as the reader will soon see.

On this night of which we write, the saloon was well filled, as usual, and about nine o'clock, at which hour the boxing began, London Bill, who always acted as master of ceremonies, mounted the stage, accompanied by the two boxers and a couple of hangers-on, who acted as their seconds.

"Now, then, gents, attention hall," exclaimed the proprietor of the London Arms, who, like many of the men reared in the great English city, sometimes made sad work with the letter H.

"I ham about to introduce to your notice two of the greatest fighters that 'ave ever been seen. Tom Benjamin, the Birmingham Infant, and Joe Murphy, known far and wide as Dublin Tricks, who will give you an exhibition of the manly hart of self-defense and show you 'ow battles is lost and won."

"In course, gents, you must understand that Mister Murphy labors under a disadvantage in meeting a man like the Infant, 'cos he ain't in 'is class, but for hall that he don't hallow himself to be made an 'oly show of."

The crowd applauded, and then the two had a "three-round" contest, which greatly delighted the audience.

When this was ended, London Bill again came to the front and addressed the crowd:

"Now, then, gents, as you 'ave seen what these two coves can do in this line, I 'ave an offer for to make to you."

"Mister Dublin Tricks 'ere, in my opinion,

can best any man hin the world at a 'undred and thirty pounds, or thereabouts.

"He's no hog, you know, and he won't stand on a pound or two. He don't bar no hundred-and-forty-pound man."

"I stand ready to pay a man, not over a 'undred and forty pounds, fifty dollars who kin stand up ag'in' Mister Tricks for four rounds, Marquis of Queensberry rules, and another fifty if he kin knock Mister Tricks hout."

"And I make the same offer to hany man, no matter 'ow big he is, nor 'ow much he weighs, who kin stand up ag'in' the Birmingham Infant on the same conditions."

"Now don't be bashful, gents; 'ere's a chance for some of you to collar the ducats if you can do the trick!"

The audience applauded, as they always applaud all speakers of this kind, and then each man looked at his neighbor as much as to ask, "Are you going to try it on?" while the boxers rested their gloved hands on the ropes, outstretched at right angles to their bodies, the pugilist's favorite attitude between rounds, and grinned at the upturned faces of the audience.

This challenge was no new thing, but had been issued nightly ever since the two boxers made their *début* in the saloon.

At first there had been plenty of rough customers eager to gain the money; men who thought they were fighters, and believed that it would not be a difficult matter to stand up against the boxers for a four-round contest.

But although neither Dublin Tricks nor the Birmingham Infant were first-class men in their lines, yet they were so immensely superior to the unscioned fellows who endeavored to stand up against them, that they had succeeded in knocking out all who had tried to win the money offered by London Bill.

The citizens had become well-posted, and the money had no temptations for them now.

For the last week the only men who had tried to gain the prizes were strangers in the camp, who were not aware of the difficulties of the feat.

After finishing his speech, London Bill gazed down upon the crowd, wondering if any strangers had strayed into the camp who would be apt to make fun for the boys.

No one moved, though, and the host began to come to the conclusion that there wouldn't be any contest that evening.

He resolved, however, to try one last appeal. "Come, gents, don't hall speak at once!" he exclaimed.

"Don't 'urt each other in your 'urry to get onto this 'ere staging!"

The crowd grinned; joking of this kind was exactly suited to their comprehension.

"It seems a shame for me to 'ang good money hup, and then not 'ave any one come forward fer to go for it."

Again the members of the audience looked at each other, and each man, as he caught the eyes of his neighbor fixed with an inquiring glance upon his face, shook his head as much as to say, "Not any in mine, thank you!"

"Well, bless my heyes!" exclaimed the old saloon-keeper, in disgust.

"I never did see men so afeard of going in for to win good money!"

"Say! you ain't going for to let me bluff the whole gang, are you?"

Again the miners looked at each other, and then there was a decided sensation in the crowd, for the Silver Sport, who was in the rear of the room, began to make his way toward the platform.

London Bill caught sight of him immediately and a broad grin came over his coarse features, for he perceived at the first glance that he was a sport, decidedly superior to the average man who is to be encountered in the Western mining-camp.

"Make way for the gent!" he shouted, "'Ere comes a customer!"

Every eye in the room was fixed upon the platform, as King Dandy, as he had called himself, ascended the steps which led to it, and greeted the keeper of the saloon.

"How are ye?" our hero observed, with a nod, as he gained the platform, addressing London Bill.

"I suppose I am a little backward in coming forward, but then that is owing to my natural bashfulness, you see."

"A more bashful man than your humble servant to command you couldn't scare up in Arizona, and that is all in the world that keeps me back, as I am a man of great natural ability, although you wouldn't think it, maybe, to gaze at me."

London Bill took a good look at the sharp, and—despite the finical way in which he was attired and the peculiar manner in which he wore his hair, which gave him an effeminate appearance—was good judge enough of mankind to see that his head was set upon his shoulders in a bulldog-like way, and from the massive jaw and resolute mouth he guessed the stranger had the heart of a warrior.

Then he surveyed his figure, saw that he was well built, and apparently muscular, and although at the first glance he had formed the

opinion that such a "jack-a-dandy" would stand no chance in a boxing-match, he now modified it, concluding if the sharp knew anything about boxing he would be able to make a pretty good show.

"I've had on the gloves once or twice when I was a boy in the East, and so I know a thing or two about this kind of game, although I reckon I am a little heavy, for I must weigh some where around a hundred and sixty, yet I'm the meat for either of your men if they are willing," the sport continued.

"Bully for you!" cried a bystander, and the crowd echoed the shout.

CHAPTER IV. THE CONTEST.

DUBLIN TRICKS was quick to accept the challenge.

Murphy was a tolerably good man with his fists, but, to use the ring saying, he was no general; that is, he was no judge of the capabilities of the man to whom he was opposed.

Deceived by the effeminate appearance, which the long ringlets and the fanciful attire gave to the stranger, he at once jumped to the conclusion that he was a dude, and that, in a single round, he would handle him in such a way that he would never come up for a second trial.

"Oh, I'm your man!" Dublin Tricks cried. "I reckon you ain't near as heavy as you think you are, and there isn't anything of the hog about me, you can bet.

"I am willing to scrap with any man who comes within twenty pounds of my weight."

"That suits me just to death!" the other exclaimed. "But I warn you that I am awfully deceptive. I am a far heavier man than I look.

"You see I am one of the fighters who strip big."

"Oh, you're a fighter, are you?" cried Dublin Tricks in contempt, while the Birmingham Infant grinned in huge delight at the absurdity of the idea.

"Oh, yes, when I was at college I held the middle-weight championship, and although that was some years ago, I reckon I hain't forgot how to handle my dukes."

Dublin Tricks laughed scornfully, for he regarded this assertion as being mere bravado, and in this the other pugilist agreed, but the veteran boxer, London Bill, remembered a time in the old country, when some of the college boys were able to hold their own against any of regular professionals in a fisticuff game, and he himself could recall a contest, when a noble lord, whom he had run across in a public house, had administered to him the worst thrashing he had ever received, either in or out of a prize-ring.

The veteran loungeer judged that the stranger had the weight and the muscle to "best" Dublin Tricks, provided he possessed the necessary science.

London Bill knew that neither of his two bruisers were entitled to rank as first class men, and then, too, neither one was in good condition for a contest of this sort, both being addicted to strong drink and high living.

And if it had not been for the fact that he had money pending on the result, he would have been glad to see the conceit taken out of the boxers, both of whom were inclined to put on considerable airs on account of the success which they had met with since their engagement at the London Arms.

"Ow may I call your name?" the saloon-keeper asked.

"Wylde—Highland Wylde. Hi Wylde, for short."

"All right."

Then addressing the audience, London Bill said:

"Gents, hallow me for to 'ave the pleasure of introducing to you Mr. Hi Wylde, who is a-going for to try and best the light-weight champion, Dublin Tricks, in four rounds, Marquis of Queensberry's rules, which is three minutes to a round and a minute between."

The audience yelled at this announcement, for there wasn't a man in the room who did not expect that there would be some fun in the encounter, although there were but few in the assemblage who thought the stranger sharp would be able to stand up long when opposed to a professional boxer like Murphy.

"Got any friends to second you?" London Bill asked.

"I reckon I will have to appeal to the crowd," was the answer.

"You see, I only struck the camp this afternoon, and I haven't had time to make any acquaintances, and, as far as I have seen, I don't think there is a soul in the town whom I know."

"Any two gents like to volunteer for to hassist Mister Wylde?" the master of ceremonies asked.

Two young men, who stood side by side, a yard from the platform, after exchanging a few words, moved forward to the steps by the side of which London Bill stood.

These two were well known in the camp, being partners in a mine, a couple of miles up Salt River, known as the Last Drink Lode.

The shorter of the two was a Southern-born, dark-haired, dark-eyed fellow, called Raymond Thibodeaux, and his companion was a blonde-haired, blue-eyed giant, from the pine woods of Maine, answering to the appellation of Gilbert Ellsworth.

Both of these young men came of good families in their respective sections.

They were educated at college together, and when the institution, old Harvard, dismissed them as finished scholars, with that thirst for adventure so common to the Anglo-Saxon race, they had turned their backs upon the comforts and delights of civilization, and plunged into the Western wilderness, with the idea of carving out a fortune for themselves, independent of the old folks at home.

Two better fellows than proud Ray Thibodeaux and honest, jolly-souled Gil Ellsworth existed not upon the earth, so all their acquaintances declared.

"Stranger, myself and pard here once went through college—in at the front door and put out at the back by the janitor—and we reckon we ought to lend you a hand, if we can be of any assistance in this leetle game," the Maine giant remarked, as he gained the platform, closely followed by the young Southerner.

The three young men exchanged glances, and with the natural freemasonry so common to generous youth, became friends upon the instant.

"Much obliged, and I will do as much for you at any time that it may be in my power," the strange sharp replied.

And then the three clasped hands to seal the compact.

Both of the young men were well known to the Englishman, and the moment they announced that they intended to stand by the stranger, he understood that there couldn't be any nonsense about the business, for both of the partners born a first-class reputation in the town.

Two cooler, braver men Crested Hill held not within its confines, and then, too, they were known to be warriors, although peaceable fellows, who did their best to avoid quarrels; and as they were reputed to be dead shots and very quick on the "draw," quarrelsome men generally avoided them and sought for antagonists of less repute.

"Glad to see you, gents," remarked London Bill; "glad that this 'ere gent 'as got such men as you for to stand by 'im."

"Taffy!" suggested the Yankee.

"Honor bright!" protested the saloon-keeper.

"Too thin!" responded the Southerner.

And then there was a general laugh at English Bill's expense.

"As you two gents 'ave seen a few shows of this 'ere kind, I s'pose you know 'ow the old thing works?" the veteran remarked.

"Oh, yes, I think we can look after our friend here as well as though we had seconded a dozen champions in as many desperate battles," Thibodeaux observed.

"Peel for it then!" London Bill cried.

"A fair field, no favor, and may the best man win!"

The three young men climbed over the ropes, and took a position in the corner opposite to where Dublin Tricks stood, the heavy-weight retiring to the outside of the ropes.

The Silver Sport began to undress, assisted by the amateur seconds.

He removed the dandified coat and the elaborately ruffled shirt, stripping to his pantaloons and undershirt.

The undergarment was a short-sleeved one—just right for such a contest as this, and when the outer things were removed, the stranger drew a red silk handkerchief from his pocket and bound it tightly around his waist.

There was a hum of astonishment when the disrobing process was completed, for no one in the room—not even the veteran pugilist, imagined that the Silver Sport was anywhere near as big a man as he really was.

Now that his clothes were off, he looked bigger than he did when he had them on, and when London Bill called "time!" and he advanced to meet his adversary he looked like a perfect gladiator in every respect.

Even Dublin Tricks, with all his stupidity, looked amazed, as his opponent came forward to meet him, for, to his judgment, the stranger appeared to be fully as big a man in every way as the heavy-weight, and one thing was plainly apparent, he was a far more sprightly man on his feet.

And the thought came into the pugilist's mind that if his opponent really knew anything of boxing, he had a job before him that would be likely to tax all his energies.

The two came up to the imaginary line which is supposed to be in the center of the ring, and which is technically called the "scratch."

But as they extended their hands for the customary hand-shake always the preliminary to a boxing contest, the Silver Sport, pausing suddenly, exclaimed:

"Excuse me for a moment, I forgot my curls!"

And then, returning to his seconds, he hunted out a piece of narrow red ribbon from the in-

side pocket of his coat and, by his direction Ellsworth tied his long silver-hued curls in a bunch at the back of his head so that they would be out of his way.

This gave a strange appearance to his head and caused many of the lookers-on to indulge in a laugh.

"Oh, you may laugh all you like, me bold boyees!" exclaimed one of the veteran miners, "for if he has got the ha'r of a woman, the muscles of a giant are along with it, and my money talks for to say he knocks the bruiser out, and don't you forget it!"

None of the laughers cared to accept the banter though.

The strange sharp was a mystery, and it was the general impression that he would be apt to astonish Dublin Tricks before he got through with him.

The adversaries shook hands, and then threw themselves into position, the Silver Sport adopting a low guard with his hands well down, while his opponent kept his high.

For nearly a minute they sparred, Dublin Tricks seeking an opening, while the other kept on the defensive.

CHAPTER V.

AN ASTONISHING RESULT.

THE spectators watched the boxers with the eyes of hawks, and, right from the beginning, it was evident that the Silver Sport was fully as expert with the gloves as his opponent, for with all of Dublin Tricks's skillful maneuvering he could not get an opening so as to "reach" his antagonist.

The gloves, by the way, with which the fighters were armed, were not the usual huge boxing-bags, but only common buckskin gloves, slightly padded across the knuckles with horse-hair, "hard gloves," as they are technically termed by the sporting gentlemen, and with such gloves, it is possible to inflict a blow almost as severe as with the bare knuckles.

Finding that his opponent's guard was so perfect that no opening could be found in it, Dublin Tricks resolved to try a "cross-counter," that is, he would expose his person to a blow for the sake of getting one in himself in return.

But the result of the movement was not at all like what he had expected.

Taking advantage of the opening, the Silver Sport sent out his right fist with such terrible force that the blow, alighting on the side of Dublin Tricks's jaw, spun him round sideways, so he was unable to give a stroke in return, and his opponent followed the first blow with a second, even more terrific in force, which, catching the pugilist on the neck, right on the jugular-vein, knocked him clean through the ropes and off the staging to the floor.

A howl of astonishment went up from the throats of the crowd as they witnessed the effect of the terrific blow, and a rush was made to where Dublin Tricks lay, senseless, upon the floor.

He had been "knocked out," and many of the audience were apprehensive that the man's neck had been broken by the fall, for he had come to the ground like a log.

The old Englishman, though, a thorough sport, was alive to the necessities of the situation, and as the bystanders surged toward the helpless man, he yelled at the top of his voice:

"Don't hany of you go for to touch 'im, for hit is ag'in' the rules."

"Keep away! don't crowd round 'im! Give 'im hair and he will come up smiling for the next round!"

Watch in hand, London Bill was counting the flight of time, keeping an anxious eye upon the boxer, for if he did not recover from his stupor within the provided seconds, mount the stage and be ready to toe the scratch at the call of time, he was a vanquished man.

As for the Silver Sport, he retired to his corner, took a seat in the chair provided there for his accommodation, and fell into conversation with his seconds, apparently none the worse for his exertions.

Thibodeaux and Ellsworth were ready with their handkerchiefs to "rub him down," but not in the least did he stand in need of their aid.

"By Jove, old fellow, you have knocked the bruiser out in the first round!" the impulsive Southerner declared.

"And it looks, too, as if you had broken the fellow's neck," the man from Maine added.

"Oh, no, he's a tough piece of humanity. Such a man as Dublin Tricks will never mind a little thing like that," the Sport replied.

The breathing-space was up, and, with a world of regret in his voice, the old Englishman called out:

"Time."

Highland Wylde rose promptly to his feet.

"You have won the hundred dollars!" the young Southerner exclaimed in his ear as he noticed that Murphy as yet exhibited no signs of life.

"Oh, he's knocked out, and no mistake!" Ellsworth chimed in.

"Of course he had no business with a man like myself; I am altogether too big for him, but he would have made a better show if he hadn't

been idiot enough to lay himself open for the sake of getting a counter.

"Such a game may work well sometimes when a man is a smaller one than yourself, but it is awful risky when the fellow is bigger and heavier in every way."

Advancing to the "scratch" the Silver Sport waited for his adversary to come to "time."

But he was not destined to face Murphy again that evening.

Dublin Tricks had been "knocked out" in the most complete manner, and it was fully five minutes before he recovered the use of his senses.

The pugilist felt very sore over his defeat, which he attributed to the fall from the staging, declaring stoutly that it wasn't the blow, for that didn't "phaze" him in the least.

"I reckon I will take that hundred dollars," the Silver Sport remarked, when, in answer to the clamor of the crowd, London Bill announced that the stranger was the victor.

"Pay it over!" exclaimed Wylde, promptly.

"You needn't be in such a hurry," the Englishman retorted, decidedly out of humor at the easy victory which the other had achieved.

"I want to use the money," the Silver Sport explained, in the most courteous way.

"Having captured the first hundred I am eager to get a chance at the second, and I thought that this gentleman"—and he bowed to the Birmingham Infant, who only scowled at him in return—"might like to try a side bet of fifty or a hundred with me on the event."

"Oh, I'll go you a thousand that you don't stand up before me for four rounds!" the pugilist cried, in a boastful way, and he hauled a roll of bills out of his pocket, almost as big as his fist.

"Pardner, I would cover your thousand in a minute but I haven't the ducats!" the Silver Sport replied.

"I will have to own up to the melancholy fact that I am down clear to the bed-rock; if you should try me for ore I wouldn't pan out ten cents to the ton."

"The last solitary coin that I had—a great American eagle—I blew into the hotel till for my board, otherwise I would cover every dollar that you could put up."

Immediately the two seconds dove their hands into their pockets and fished up what money they had.

Between the two there was an even hundred dollars, and this they pressed the Silver Sport to accept, which he did in the same spirit in which it was offered.

The Birmingham Infant was somewhat taken aback when he found his banter so promptly accepted, but he couldn't well back out now, and so he deposited his cash in the hands of the Englishman, whom the Silver Sport announced he would be perfectly satisfied to have act as stakeholder.

Then the men retired to their corners to prepare for the contest.

"Now, no beastly nonsense, you know!" London Bill observed, in a nervous way, to the big pugilist.

"Don't you make the mistake that Dublin Tricks did and go to 'olding this cove too cheap, 'cos he's a hummer, and don't you forget it!"

"Oh, that is all right!" the Birmingham Infant replied, in the most confident manner.

"He knocked Dublin Tricks out with a chance blow, but then he is too big for Murphy, anyway, and Tricks was a fool to try to stand up ag'in' so big a man."

London Bill shook his head in a doubtful sort of way.

If the boxer was confident, he was not, for he felt fully satisfied that it was no chance blow that had put Dublin Tricks "to sleep."

He had seen enough of the stranger to understand that he was a better man than the big bruiser, for he knew that the Infant would never have been able to knock Dublin Tricks out so easily.

In his opinion the odds were big that the second hundred would follow the first, and he did not enjoy the prospect at all.

While this conversation had been going on between London Bill and the Birmingham Infant, the stranger sport and his two seconds exchanged a few words.

"You will not be able to knock this big fellow out so easily—he carries too much beef," Thibodeaux observed.

"Yes, that is so," the Yankee hastened to add.

"Although to my thinking he is no better man than the other, yet his weight makes him a far more dangerous foe."

"And that is just where the beauty of the Marquis of Queensberry's rules come in," Wylde replied.

"In a regular ring contest the round ends when a man is knocked down; that is, if he doesn't see fit to rise, his seconds are at liberty to rush to his assistance."

"But in this knocking-out business, the round lasts three minutes, and if a man is knocked down, he must get up as quickly as he can, unaided, and renews the fight until the time expires."

"So, if a man can manage to get a lead and floor his antagonist, all he has to do is to wait until the fellow is on his feet and then he is at liberty to whack him again before the other has fairly time to prepare himself for the attack, and that is the kind of game I am going to try on my big friend across the way."

The old Englishman's cry of "Time!" ended the conversation at this point.

The opponents faced each other.

And then, the moment the hand-shake was over, the Silver Sport attacked with the fury of a tiger, and for three minutes there was as fierce a battle as any man in the audience had ever seen, and the spectators yelled like a lot of madmen at the sight.

The Infant was outfought from the beginning, and though he managed to get in quite a number of blows, they seemed to lack steam, and apparently did no damage, while the sport's cracks—most of them delivered on the "mark," as the stomach, above the belt, is called, the stranger fighting for the body principally—made the big fellow wince every time the blow reached him.

The round ended with a clinch—London Bill yelling "Break! break!" at the top of his lungs, as such a thing is not allowed by the rules—in which the Silver Sport "made play" for the face in a way which the other despised.

When the men separated and retired to their corners, both plainly betrayed how violent had been the exertions they had made, but the Birmingham Infant was far more winded than his antagonist, and it was plain he was almost exhausted.

"You beastly donkey!" cried the old Englishman angrily in the ear of the gasping pugilist.

"What in blazes do you want to try a rush game with a cove w'ot kin 'it as 'ard as you kin, and is quicker with 'is fists, too, and you as fat as a blarsted 'og!"

"Keep away from 'im—wear 'im hout, or you will be knocked hout, for sure!"

The call of "time" came altogether too quick to suit the big fellow, and his "bellows" were in a bad condition for active work when he faced his antagonist.

He had resolved to adopt the advice of the saloon-keeper and play shy of the other until he got his second wind, but the stranger sport knew a trick worth two of that, for the moment he faced his man he made another furious attack, upon him.

For a moment it was hammer and tongs, the blows exchanged so rapidly that it was hardly possible to see them, the audience the while shrieking like demons, and then the Birmingham Infant, finding the "pepper" too hot for him, attempted to break ground and retreat, but did it so clumsily that he caught his heels together, and receiving at the same moment a terrific "upper-cut" from the Silver Sport, went down.

This was the opportunity which the stranger sought.

The moment the Birmingham Infant was fairly on his feet, down he went again prostrated by a terrific blow.

Ten times in rapid succession was the boxer prostrated before the three minutes expired, and then he had to be carried to his corner, and when time was called it found him too exhausted to stand up, although not particularly damaged.

His fat and the peculiar nature of the contest had beaten him, although it was plain he was no match for his antagonist.

With ill-grace London Bill paid over the money, and then the Silver Sport departed, the hero of the hour.

His victory was enhanced by the fact that he was plainly a gentleman, and no common bruiser.

It was with the greatest difficulty that he got away from the admiring crowd that night for they were determined upon making a regular lion of him.

CHAPTER VI.

A STRANGE PROPOSAL.

WHEN our hero arose in the morning he did not feel much the worse for the strange experience through which he had passed on the preceding night.

He had not escaped receiving a few lusty thumps, but as his flesh was solid—iron-like in its nature, no fat, all bone and muscle—he felt no particular ill-effect.

Wylde had told the truth when he said that all the cash he possessed was a ten-dollar gold-piece when he struck the camp of Crested Hill.

A streak of ill-luck had attended his progress through New Mexico, and at Old Fort Tulerosa he had encountered some jolly fellows, who had not only succeeded in cleaning out his pockets, but had also won his horse, and, in fact, everything he possessed in the world, with the exception of the suit of clothes he wore and his weapons, and though he was sorely tempted to risk these upon the uncertain chance of fortune, yet he resisted the impulse, for a man leading a life of adventure upon the border without good

tools of this description would be in a bad plight.

And he would have come into Crested Hill absolutely penniless if he had not happened to find a ten-dollar gold-piece on the road just as he reached the neighborhood of the town.

This he took to be an omen of good luck, for it was the first piece of money he had ever found in his life.

But now, thanks to the victories he had achieved over the boxers, he was in funds again.

After partaking of breakfast he took a seat in the saloon, which was also the office of the hotel, and proceeded to map out a course of action for the future.

"Now that I am three hundred to the good, I am in a good position to make a fresh start in life in this camp," he mused.

"Judging from appearances, it is a lively place, and likely to amount to something, and if I can get into some good thing, I ought, in time, to become one of the solid men of the town."

"But I must give up my propensity for seeking a short cut to fortune by means of the gaming-table, and Spanish monté, in particular, I must fight shy of, for if the tiger represents faro, then a lion, claws and all, must stand for the seductive game of monté."

It was no wonder that the sharp spoke bitterly, for it was in an attempt to "beat" monté that he had been despoiled of his valuables.

"I don't mind a little quiet game of poker," he continued, "just to pass the time away, with the ante high enough to afford amusement, but no more reckless gaming."

"I am a reformed man, and in the future will act so that no one will have any right to make mouths at me."

"But the first thing is to strike something at which I can earn an honest living."

His reflections at this point were interrupted by the approach of the landlord.

Jared Somerset, the host of the Old Kentucky Home, was a decided character.

Long, lean and lank, a huge-boned, ungainly man, over six feet high, but appearing taller by reason of his sparseness, yet as genial a soul as ever walked the earth.

Taking a chair, he seated himself by the sharp's side, then said, in the most friendly way possible:

"Stranger, I reckon you air a hull team, including the dog under the wagon!"

"Much obliged for your good opinion."

"Some of ther boys were jest a-telling me how you knocked out those bruisers last night."

"Yes, I managed to do the trick."

"It was a big thing; I jest heerd onto it. Say, you ain't in that business, air you?"

"Not much; only an amateur."

"Going to drive yer stakes in this hyer town?"

"I am thinking of it."

"Right smart place and bound to grow. Any particular business that you kin drive at?"

"Yes, I understand all about mining."

"A mill or on yer own hook?"

"Both."

"Wa-al, thar ought to be a chance fer you in this hyer section."

"Oh, I've not the least doubt in regard to that."

"Say, I s'pose you are open for almost any kind of a job?"

And from the way in which the landlord spoke the Silver sport was led to believe that he had some particular object in view.

"Oh, yes, if the thing is all right, and promises to be worth my while."

"I can let you into a good spec, I reckon," the landlord remarked, in a confidential sort of way.

"Come along with me."

Somerset led the way to his private apartment, which was a medium-sized room in the rear part of the building.

Seated in the apartment was the dark-eyed beauty who had arrived so unexpectedly in the camp on the preceding day.

"Miss Marshal, this hyer is Mister Wylde whom I was speaking to you about," said the host.

"I am glad to make your acquaintance, sir," observed the girl, in a clear musical voice, and, rising, she tendered her hand in the frankest manner.

The Silver Sport had noticed and admired her beauty on the previous day, although he had been a considerable distance from the spot where she stood, as he had selected a convenient nook, well up on the hillside, from which to observe the fun.

But now that he was face to face with the girl he saw that she was even more beautiful than he supposed.

"Wa-al, as two is company, and three is a crowd, I'll leave you folks to talk business without hindering you with my carcass," and with this speech the gaunt Kentuckian departed.

"Be seated please," said the lady.

The sport complied with the request.

"You are at liberty to make an engagement, I presume?" she continued.

"I am."

"So I supposed, or else Mr. Somerset would not have introduced you.

"Are you acquainted with the particulars of yesterday's tragedy?"

"Yes, I witnessed the conflict from the hill-side."

"It was a cruel, brutal murder!" the girl declared, her voice husky with emotion, and the great tear-drops welled into her glorious black eyes.

Wylde could hardly bring himself to agree with this statement, although he knew nothing in regard to the particulars of the case, so he was not able to decide which party had the right on their side, but, as far as he could see, it was a fair fight, and, according to his code, when men go into a game of this kind, no one has a right to complain if some of the parties get hurt.

It was only natural though that the girl should feel aggrieved, for women are not apt to look at these matters in the same light as men.

But not being willing to commit himself he merely nodded.

"My poor brother was the victim of a merciless, ruthless band. He was the original discoverer of the mine, but the men whom he was induced to admit into partnership with him, perceiving that the property was an extremely valuable one, determined to wrest it from him.

"It was the old story. They were rich—had plenty of money with which to fight their battles, while he was poor, although it is our boast in this land of the free that we have only one law for both rich and poor, yet it is not so, for in the law courts, as well as elsewhere, the men with abundant wealth have an immense advantage over those who are without means."

"Oh, yes, no doubt at all about that. Lawyers are only men and must live; courts are expensive and must have fees on which to subsist, and it is only a pleasant fiction that justice can be had without money."

"I knew nothing of the trouble until at the very end almost," the girl explained.

"My brother had written me that he had made a rich strike here and I expected that he was rapidly growing wealthy, but then there came a letter which told me all the particulars of the conspiracy to wrest the mine from him, and in the letter he begged me to raise what money I could and come to his assistance as soon as possible.

"By my father's death I inherited a little fortune, and my brother knew this.

"I obeyed the request as soon as possible, but it took days to arrange the details, and so I was not able to reach Crested Hill in time to be of any assistance.

"My brother was dead when I arrived, but if I have not come in time to save, I can at least avenge his cruel murder.

"The money I raised to assist him I will devote to ruining the man who now holds the Red Elephant property, and in this enterprise I need the aid of a clear-headed, resolute man, who will not shrink to play his cards for all they are worth; you have been recommended to me.

"You can fix your own price, and if you succeed in executing my vengeance, you can name your own reward, for I swear I will never know peace or rest until I have full measure of revenge!"

She had risen to her feet as she spoke, and, as the burning words broke from her lips, she looked like an inspired prophetess.

She was a beautiful woman; the Silver Sport gazed upon her in admiration, and the thought came to him that if he succeeded in the task which she proposed he might not only win a rich reward, but the girl herself, which would indeed be a prize worth a struggle.

And so he accepted the offer.

It was to be a fair fight, for Wylde would have scorned to strike a foe who was not prepared for war, and so, as one of the conditions of his acceptance, the girl agreed to warn Murray that she had declared war against him, and would use all possible means to compass his ruin and wrest from him the Red Elephant property.

Meanwhile, as the campaign must be conducted secretly, it was arranged that all conferences between the lady and her warrior must be in private.

Three hours later Oriana Marshall's defiance was placed in Alexander Murray's hand.

He read it, greatly annoyed, but consoled himself with the thought that the girl would soon discover she was powerless to do him harm, for his title to the mine had been so surely settled by the courts that no reopening of the case was possible.

But he had yet to learn the depth of a woman's wit.

CHAPTER VII.

UP IN THE FOOTHILLS.

Now, in order to find out how the land lay, the Silver Sport managed to get into conversation with the sheriff, who also put up at the hotel.

The information he received from this individual was meager in the extreme.

All he knew about the matter was that there had been a big legal fight in the court at Tucson and that the Murray party had won by "a big majority," as he expressed it; but in regard to the merits of the case, or how the victory had been achieved, he knew nothing.

One thing, though, he did not hesitate to say, and that was, although Michael Fronteras was dead, and it was the custom never to speak ill of the departed, yet no man that he knew of could speak a good word for him, for a bigger rascal, in every respect, than the dead Mexican had never flourished in Arizona, and that he had not stretched hemp a long time ago was only owing to the fact that "his legs had been too well brought up to see his body abused."

Wylde saw that a visit to Tucson would be necessary, and as he was one of the kind of men who never let any grass grow under their feet, he purchased a horse and set out on his journey immediately.

Arriving at Tucson he hunted up the lawyers who had conducted Fronteras's case, and now that the matter was settled, these legal lights—or sharks, rather, to give them their true title—admitted it had been their opinion from the beginning that Fronteras's claim had never had a leg to stand on.

They argued the case because they were paid, and it was their duty to do the best they could for their client, but they knew it was only a waste of time.

Fronteras had received full payment for any interest that he ever had in the mine, and his holding on to the property for the purpose of getting extra money was more like highway robbery than anything else.

And in Tucson, as in Crested Hill, all with whom he came in contact, were of the opinion that the Mexican was as big a rascal as ever escaped a white jail.

In a day he learned all that could be discovered, so he mounted his horse and set out on his return.

And as he rode on the homeward trail he deliberated upon the matter.

"Fronteras was a rascal—hadn't any right to the mine, and deserved to die, and Murray was in no way to blame for having a hand in his killing.

"But he was the brother of this magnificent creature, and it is only natural that she doesn't take any stock in the statement that he wasn't in the right.

"Now, then, this question comes up. Am I justified in espousing her quarrel?—shall I do my best to throw this man, Murray, out of the Red Elephant property?"

The Silver Sport pondered for a time over this difficult question, but at last, coming to a decision, exclaimed:

"Why not?"

"Why shouldn't I back her up? Her brother was killed in the fight, it is only natural she should crave for revenge, and then, too, there isn't much doubt that Murray and his associates did not treat the Mexican as squarely as they might have done in the affair, no matter what the lawyers say.

"His legal sharps evidently sold him out and, as from all accounts this Murray is a clear-headed, resolute man, not particularly scrupulous either, like all these dashing, gigantic speculators, why shouldn't I try my wits against his and throw him out of this Red Elephant property, all in the way of business, of course?"

Having come to this conclusion, thinking it no harm to fight fire with fire, our hero dismissed the subject from his mind and pushed on toward Crested Hill as rapidly as possible.

Although he was a stranger to the trail, having only traversed it once before on his journey to Tucson, he managed to keep to the road until he came to where the trail wound in among the foothills of the White Mountains.

He was only a few miles' ride from Crested Hill—not over twenty at the utmost—when he suddenly came to the conclusion that he had lost his way.

The shades of night were falling fast too when he made this unwelcome discovery, and, finding that the trail had dwindled down to a sort of a sheep-track, he looked around for some shelter for the night.

He was well up amid the foothills, so that his view took in a vast tract of country, and as he gazed down at the valley beneath him, he was glad to perceive the welcome sight of smoke curling up on the air.

And as he gazed more earnestly he fancied that he could discern a small log-house, half-hidden amid a clump of pines from whence came the smoke.

As he was on the wrong trail he would have to retrace his steps anyway, and now that he came to think the matter over he came to the conclusion that he had passed within a rifle-shot of the house when on his downward trip.

The Silver Sport lost no time in making his way to the house.

As he approached it, a girl came forth to greet him.

She was of medium size, young in years and rarely beautiful.

Her eyes were of the deepest blue, her complexion clear red and white, and her hair,

which hung in a profusion of wild ringlets, half-way down to her waist, was of the hue of beaten gold.

She was poorly attired in a common homespun dress, her arms bare almost to the shoulder, for the sleeves were rolled up, and they were as perfect limbs as an artist could have desired.

She wore neither stockings nor shoes, and her lower limbs were as perfect as the upper.

"I have lost my way and seek shelter for the night," the adventurer said, "unless I am near to the camp of Crested Hill, which is my destination."

The girl shook her head, and there was a strange, peculiar look in her dark eyes as she made reply:

"I know that there is such a place as Crested Hill, but how far it is from here and in what direction it lies I am ignorant."

The voice of the girl was mellow and deep, and as the Silver Sport listened to it, the thought came to him that it was the most beautiful voice that had ever fallen upon his ears, far surpassing the tones of the Eastern beauty, Oriana Marshall.

And then she was so beautiful, too—beauty unadorned, for she wore not a single trinket, not a lace or ribbon to set off her charms, but she was so superbly lovely that she looked like a queen, despite her rough, coarse garments.

"Crested Hill cannot be very near here then, or else you would be apt to know, I presume," the sharp observed.

"Although, according to my calculation, I ought to be within thirty miles of the camp, but then I wandered from the trail some time ago, and I may have come a considerable distance astray."

"Do not tarry here!" exclaimed the girl, abruptly. "As you value your life ride onward without delay!"

And as she spoke she raised her exquisitely-formed right arm and pointed down the valley.

"I don't understand you—why should I ride on?" Wylde questioned.

The shades of night are gathering fast, and as I haven't the remotest idea in which direction I ought to proceed, the prospect is not a pleasant one.

"Now if you could direct me how to find the trail which leads to Crested Hill, I would gladly push on, for I am in a hurry to reach the town, but it would be the height of folly for me to go on a wild-goose chase in the darkness."

"Yes, yes, I know that, but something seems to tell me to warn you not to stay. It seems to me as if there was danger lurking in the air above your head, and that you can only avoid it by departing."

"That is strange!" the Silver Sport exclaimed, not knowing what to make of the affair, for the girl appeared to be perfectly sensible in every respect, inconsistent as were her words.

At this moment a new-comer appeared upon the scene.

A tall, broad-shouldered, middle-aged man, dressed like a hunter, with long iron-gray hair trailing down upon his shoulders, and a huge beard of the same hue adorned his chin.

"It is my father," said the girl, as the man came down the mountain-side, whither he had evidently been in search of game.

"Hello, stranger, how are you?" exclaimed the grizzly giant, as he approached.

"What wind blows you up in these parts?"

"I am on my way to Crested Hill, but have managed to lose the road."

"Oh, you will find it again—it's thar all the time, ho, ho, ho!" and the man laughed hoarsely at his own wit.

"Am I far from the camp?"

"A matter of forty or fifty miles."

"Is it possible?"

"Deed it is! When you came to the blasted pine tree, 'bout twenty miles to the south'ard, low down in the valley—mebbe you noticed it?"

"Yes, I think I did."

"Well, you ought to have turned to the east'ard. You were within twenty miles of Crested Hill then, but you see, instead of doing that, you turned your back right on the camp, and came up into the mountains hyer about thirty miles."

"That was rather stupid in me, but I am a stranger and not used to the trail."

"Mistakes will happen in the best regulated families; that is an old saying, stranger, and I reckon it is a pesky true one."

"But thar's no harm done. You are welcome to camp down in my ranch to-night, and I will put you on the right road to-morrow."

Despite the warning which he had received from the girl, the Silver Sport accepted the offer in the same frank spirit in which it was given.

His curiosity was excited to know more of this strange couple, dwelling in such a secluded spot.

The ranch was a substantial one-and-a-half story cabin, built out of logs, with two rooms on the ground floor and a garret above.

One of the rooms was used as a living apartment and the other as the old man's bedroom, the girl occupying the garret.

A roaring log fire blazed upon the hearth and furnished light.

The man's story was a simple one.

He was a "prospector," as the men who search for the precious metals are called, by name, Edmund Carson, and his daughter was called Patience.

Ill-luck had attended him, and, growing disgusted with civilization, he had swapped a lode which he had discovered—not a valuable one—for this ranch up in the foothills, and gone into sheep and cattle stock farming in a small way, believing he could make more money than at his old business.

The girl excused herself and retired to her apartment early in the evening, but the men sat by the fire and talked until after ten.

Carson had wanted to give up his bunk to the guest, but the Silver Sport would not accept the offer, saying that he would take one of the buffalo-ropes and camp down before the fire.

The host, who seemed to be a good-natured, but indolent sort of man, expressed his opinion that he "s'posed" it wouldn't be a bad idea, and then bending toward Wylde said cautiously:

"How would you like a drink afore you turn in for a night-cap?"

"I've got a flask of prime stuff, but I never drink afore my gal, as she's dead set ag'in' whisky."

The night was chilly, and our hero felt that a little stimulant would not come amiss, and so expressed himself.

As the old man produced the flask from a hiding-place which he had arranged between the logs, the thought came to Wylde that his host was a hard drinker, and this was probably the reason why ill-luck pursued him.

The whisky was tolerably good, and the two men drank each other's healths.

Then Carson retreated to his apartment, carrying the flask with him, which suggested to the Silver Sport the idea that he intended to finish the liquor before he slept.

After the old man's departure, Wylde rolled himself up in a buffalo-robe and stretched out at full length before the fire.

He had hardly lain down when a strange, drowsy sensation began to take possession of him.

It was a mystery to him, for the feeling was not at all like that which precedes the coming on of balmy, refreshing sleep.

On the contrary it was a stupor which seemed to have power over his physical forces, for though he speedily became so much under the influence that he could not move a limb, yet his brain was not at all affected, but worked as clearly as ever.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE STRANGLER.

AND then the truth flashed suddenly upon the helpless man.

He had been drugged; the whisky had been "doctored" and he was in the power of a ruffian who had entrapped him as the snare catches the rabbit.

The warning of the girl came into his mind.

Had that beautiful, apparently innocent creature a knowledge of these deeds of darkness, foul as the night was black, or was it some strange instinct which had impelled her to warn him that danger threatened?

Then into the apartment stole the old man, his eyes gleaming with demoniac fires.

In his hand he carried a silken cord, small but evidently very strong. It was arranged as a slip-noose.

Throwing open the buffalo-robe he rolled the helpless man upon his back, and then, squatting astride of his body, passed the silken noose around the neck of the Silver Sport.

And now the truth flashed upon Wylde.

He was in the hands of a strangler and a miracle alone could save him from death.

Of all the horrible situations that the mind of man could imagine, the one in which the Silver Sport was now placed was surely the worst.

The drugged liquor which he had drunk fettered all his physical powers so that he was as helpless to resist the terrible creature into whose hands he had fallen as though he was already in the embrace of the grim destroyer, icy Death.

And yet his brain was not affected by the drug infused in the whisky; he was perfectly conscious of all going on around him, and yet was unable to even move an eyelid.

With a hand as soft and a touch as delicate as a woman's the old man adjusted the noose around the neck of the helpless sport and began to slowly tighten it.

Wylde's eyes were nearly closed, so he appeared as though asleep; yet he was able to perceive the movements of the strangler.

It was a cruel death to die—to have the strong, young life choked by the merciless cord without being able to make the slightest struggle.

"May Heaven have mercy on my soul!" was the thought that surged through the mind of the victim as he felt the silken cord tighten around his throat.

Death could not be nearer to a human than it was to Highland Wylde at that moment.

And then, all of a sudden, there was a sharp report—a pistol-crack—the Silver Sport knew the sound right well, and the great, gaunt stranger fell forward on his face, coming down upon the breast and head of Highland Wylde with such force as to stun him into insensibility.

And now the mind was fully as passive as the body.

How long the Silver Sport remained in this state of stupor he knew not, but he judged it was some time, for when he awoke from it he found himself extended on a mossy bank in the open air, gazing up at the moon now riding high in the heavens.

And as the "Light by Night" did not shine until about eleven the Silver Sport judged from the moon's altitude that it was an hour or two after midnight.

By his side sat the girl, Patience, with an Indian blanket wrapped around her as a protection from the chill night-air, and she had also spread a similar covering over him.

A racking headache had seized upon Wylde, and he felt as if he had been on a gigantic spree which had lasted for a week at the least.

He had recovered the use of his limbs though, and the moment he woke from his stupor he rose to a sitting posture.

And as he did so he caught sight of his horse tethered to a tree a few feet away.

A joyful expression appeared on the earnest features of the girl as she saw that the young man was apparently none the worse for his strange adventure.

"To you, then, I owe my life!" the Silver Sport exclaimed, impulsively.

An expression of pain came over the face of the girl at this speech, for it revealed to her that the young man was aware of what had occurred; and this was a surprise, for she had not calculated upon this.

"Saved your life?" she said in a tone of question, and Highland Wylde understood her anxiety to learn how much he knew of what had occurred.

Of course it was only natural for her to suppose the drug which had been administered to him in the whisky had produced total insensibility, as, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, it undoubtedly would.

And, as the quickest way of reaching an explanation of the mystery (for, while it was evident the girl knew what had occurred, yet the Silver Sport could not believe she really knew what her father intended to do) Wylde deemed it best to allow her to understand that he knew all, and, though his limbs had been in a state of stupor, that his mind had been wide awake.

"Oh, yes; it was you, of course, or else I would not be here, with you by my side. I am aware of what has happened. I know I have been entrapped and that I was easily led into the snare. The greatest greenhorn in the land could not have been caught more easily. The whisky I drank was drugged, but the strangest thing was that, though the draught rendered my body powerless my mind was not affected, and I was aware of what occurred."

"Is it possible?" exclaimed the wondering girl.

"Yes, I saw your father steal from his room with a silken cord in his hand; then he proceeded to strangle me, and I should judge it was not the first job in that line he had performed."

"Oh, it is terrible!" cried the other, while big tears of anguish welled into her eyes.

"Well, as far as I am concerned the sensation was far from being pleasant. I felt the cord tightened around my neck—I have read of such things in tales of life in India where the Thugs, the stranglers abound, but I never expected to strike anything of that kind on this continent."

"Then there was a shot, and your father, evidently hit, pitched forward upon me, banging my own head against the floor and thus knocking me into insensibility."

"From that time I knew nothing until I woke from my swoon, a moment ago."

The girl was silent for a little while, evidently endeavoring to collect her thoughts, and uncertain what to say, but at last she spoke.

"I will not endeavor to conceal the truth from you," she said.

"My father did attempt your life, and if it had not been for an instinct which seemed to warn me that you were in danger when beneath our roof, there is little doubt he would have succeeded."

"It is a strange thing, I cannot understand it, but the moment I saw you something seemed to tell me that I must warn you not to tarry in this neighborhood."

"My father's arrival prevented me from saying anything more, but the apprehension haunted me so that I could not sleep, and as from my apartment in the garret I was able to watch all that went on in the room beneath, I was not in ignorance of what transpired."

"Yes, I see."

"I did not know why any danger should threaten you under my father's roof, but I was afraid, nevertheless."

"Then, when he procured the glasses and the

liquor was filled out, while you drank, he slyly poured his upon the ground."

"Did he do that?" the Silver Sport exclaimed.

"He did, and then I knew that some foul play was intended, but you must not think too harshly of my father!" she exclaimed, wringing her hands, while the big tears stole down her cheeks.

"For some time I have suspected from his strange actions that he is not in his right mind. He has behaved like a man whose mind is affected ever since we came to live in this desolate place."

"He is going crazy, I am sure of it! There wasn't any reason why he should attack you to-night, and I am satisfied that it is the act of a madman."

This view of the matter struck the Silver Sport as being reasonable, for this strangling business was so utterly foreign to the average borderer that it was astounding any frontiersman should attempt such a thing.

"I was so utterly taken by surprise that for a moment I almost lost my presence of mind, and knew not what to do, and then I nerved myself to make some effort to save you, for I saw that my father had become a madman and was determined upon taking your life."

"At such times it is said the mind acts quickly. It was so in my case."

"I have a revolver—although I never felt the need of one until I came to this desolate place—and by constant practice in my father's absence, have become an excellent shot."

"This fact was not known to him, for when I once asked him to provide me with a weapon, he expressed a great repugnance to the idea, and declared I should not have any such thing. I thought it strange, but I see now it was due to his disordered brain; so, after I procured my revolver, I was careful not to allow him to even suspect that I had a weapon."

"I felt I must save you, and yet I could not bring myself to do serious harm to my poor crazy father."

"A most trying position," the Silver Sport observed.

"It was, indeed, and then a brilliant idea occurred to me. I had heard of how the plainsmen sometimes capture wild horses by 'creasing' them, that is, stunning them with the bullet without inflicting other injuries, and I believed I could save you by means of some such trick."

"Heaven guided my aim and I succeeded, and then knowing that my father would soon recover from the injury, while you must have time to come to your senses and escape, I found the flask containing the drugged whisky and forced a large draught of it down his throat, then dragged him into his own room and placed him on his bed. When he awakes from his stupor in the morning the events of the night will seem to him like a disordered dream, while you will be far from here."

"If he questions me I shall pretend ignorance of course."

"And you—will you remain here with this madman?" the Silver Sport exclaimed.

"I must! he is my father, and it is my duty to remain. But you must not linger! I have been thinking over the matter, and I feel certain that my father did not tell you the truth last night in regard to the distance to Crested Hill. It is not over ten or fifteen miles, for my father often goes there on foot, and it lies due north from this spot."

"I will be able to find it then without trouble," and Wylde vaulted into the saddle.

"Remember though that you have saved my life, and I shall not rest easy until I have paid the debt. If you need aid call upon me, at any time, any hour, for anything and you may command Highland Wylde, the Silver Sport, to the extent of his life!"

A warm grasp of the hand and they parted.

CHAPTER IX.

A NOCTURNAL ADVENTURE.

ARCHIBALD MURRAY had remained until a late hour at the Red Elephant works, looking over his books and making earnest calculations, for things were not going as well as usual.

He had expended a great deal of money in getting possession of the property, and now that it was fairly in his hands, the rich ore had suddenly "petered out," to use the expressive Westernism, and the stuff they were getting hardly paid expenses, and what was worse it seemed to be getting gradually poorer.

"By Jove!" the speculator muttered, as he came to the end of his calculations and closed his books, "if the thing goes on in this way it will not be long before I will have to have somebody to take the mine off my hands, for no one will be willing to take the property even as a gift."

Then a sudden idea came into his head which caused him to smile, sardonically.

"How would it do to make the property a present to this scornful beauty who holds that I am the cause of the death of her rascally brother?"

"I will go to her and say: here, you look upon me in the light of a murderer because your brother was fool enough to attempt to re-

sist the officers of the law in discharge of their duty and got well peppered for his pains.

"Now then, the Red Elephant is my property, for I have bought the claims of all the rest of the stockholders, and I have come to make you a present of the mine and all that appertains to it, and all I ask in return is that you will look with a kindly eye upon me.

"Ha, ha, ha!" and the grim and iron-like speculator laughed aloud; "I wonder what my haughty queen would say to such a speech? Wouldn't she open those beautiful eyes of hers and stare? The offer would take her so entirely by surprise that I fancy for a time she would be puzzled for a reply."

Then Murray rose, put on his hat, extinguished his light, locked his office, and started for the hotel.

Casey, the Irish watchman, was seated on a stone by the main gate, smoking a pipe.

There was a bright moon so that all objects were almost as visible as by day.

"It is a fine night, Paddy," Murray remarked as he came up to where the watchman was seated and halted for a moment.

"Indade, and it is, yer honor."

"I see you have your rifle handy," Murray continued, perceiving that the watchman's Winchester was reclining against a rock within his reach.

"Yis, yer honor; there do be some blagg'ards of coyotes come along down the river, a-barking like a pack of dogs, an' I thought I would be afther bringing my rifle out to-night so as to be able to give them a taste of cowl lead if they had the impudence for to come nigh."

"Ah, yes; I see. I was wondering at your having your rifle out to-night for there isn't any danger to be apprehended, as the camp is very quiet just now."

"Quiet is it?" the Irishman exclaimed.

"Shure, yer honor, it is like a graveyard; sorra a bit of trouble has there been for a dog's age. Why, none of the b'yes aven have gone in for a bit of a ruction jist to k'ape their blood stirring."

"Yes; the camp is as quiet and as well-behaved as an old settled hamlet; a Sunday-school teacher would feel quite at home here."

"Yis; if he didn't happen to run across Grizzly Jake's dance-house, and that would be apt to be afther opening his eyes."

Murray smiled, for the Irishman was correct in regard to this.

"Yes; the fun there is hot and furious once in awhile," he observed.

"But there's an old saying, you know, that all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy."

"The men work hard all day, and it is only natural that some of them hanker after a little fun at night."

"Ah, it's wild devils some of them are," the Irishman remarked, with a shake of the head.

"Well, they rarely trouble anybody but those of their own kidney, so it doesn't matter much."

And then, with a good-night to the Irishman, Murray passed on his way.

As the Red Elephant works were situated about a mile from the camp the speculator had a good fifteen minutes' walk before him.

The road ran alongside the bank of the river, and as Murray went on his way, he amused himself by watching the play of the moonbeams upon the rippling water.

The speculator felt decidedly out of sorts on this occasion.

"It is the old Dead Sea apple business over again," he muttered.

"I struggled and fought for this mine, not even disdaining to use force, and now that I am securely fixed in possession of the property, so I can laugh at any attempt to get at me, the infernal lode looks as if it was going to play right out."

"And the fight has embroiled me too with the only woman whom I have ever met that I fancied."

"She blames me for her brother's death, and that puts a barrier between us, although in as far as any one knows, I had no more to do with the matter than any of the rest of the stockholders, who combined to wrest the property from him."

"But she has got the idea into her head, and there isn't the least doubt that it will not be an easy matter to get her to look at the affair in any other way."

By the time that Murray had come to this conclusion he was about half-way between the Red Elephant property and the camp.

Just ahead of him was a little clump of bushes, and when he reached the clump he was surprised by a man jumping out from behind the bushes, who immediately proceeded to level a cocked revolver at his head.

Murray came to a sudden halt as the stranger uttered the cry, so well known in the wilds of the West:

"Throw up your hands!"

The man was well disguised.

A rubber "poncho" covered his person so that about all that could be seen of his attire was a pair of rough boots, worn outside of the trowsers.

A black hood covered his head and face, and

through two holes in the hood gleamed a pair of dark eyes.

Murray was armed—few men on the frontier of the style of the speculator who are not; but his revolver was in a holster at his side concealed by the skirt of his coat, and it was clearly impossible for him to draw it in the expectation of bidding defiance to the stranger's demand.

Slowly therefore Murray proceeded to obey the summons.

"Good boy!" cried the footpad, approvingly, as he perceived that the speculator was complying with the demand.

"Don't feel inclined to try any ugly business, do you? Well, now that is right—that shows that your head is screwed on level."

"Tain't the least bit of use to kick when you find that some galoot has got the dead-wood on you."

"Best to play Captain Scott's coon and come down gracefully."

"Are you heeled?"

The question was so abruptly put that it took Murray by surprise and he hesitated, thereupon the footpad cried:

"Say! don't you understand good United States talk?"

The man spoke in a peculiar, squeaky voice, evidently not his natural tone, but a opted to disguise his own voice and so prevent him from being identified at some future time.

"Oh, yes, I understand what you mean. Of course I am heeled, and if you give me a chance to get out my weapon I will show you."

"That is jest what I am going to do, but you won't show me anything, if I know myself and the court thinks she does!"

"How do you carry your weapons?"

"I have only one—a revolver."

"Exactly, that is the one I mean."

"It is in a holster."

"Hitched onto a belt?"

"Yes."

"Under the skirts of your coat?"

"Yes."

"H'ist 'em up so I kin see."

Murray obeyed the summons.

"Good enough. Now, Red Elephant boss, have the kindness to unbuckle that air belt and lay it down onto the ground."

Murray comprehended by this title being applied to him that he was no stranger to the footpad, and so he set his wits to work to see if he could remember ever having encountered the fellow before, although as all he had to go on was his voice and being cleverly disguised, he had scant material.

The man's disguise too was perfect, and the speculator could not place him.

He obeyed the command; unbuckled the belt and deposited it upon the ground.

"Don't you try any funny business with that revolver," the footpad continued as Murray proceeded to remove the belt.

"I ain't anxious to damage you in the least, but when I am on the war-path I mean business every time."

"When a man has got the drop on me I am too much of a gentleman to disoblige him," Murray responded.

"But in this case you'll get poor pickings out of me, for I never carry much plunder around in my pockets."

"Jest have the kindness to step back two or three yards," said the stranger.

Murray obeyed, and the footpad immediately advanced, and stooping suddenly, possessed himself of the revolver.

The idea flashed into the speculator's mind that he could spring forward and overpower the outlaw, but before he had a chance to put the design into execution the other had secured the weapon and menaced him with the revolver again.

"I don't want any of your plunder," the footpad exclaimed, with a dignified air.

"I am an inventor, I am, and I have got some things which will make a heap of money for you if you will only try 'em."

CHAPTER. X.

THE DEMAND.

THIS announcement made Murray stare, for it was totally unexpected.

"An inventor?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, and that is why I have stopped you to-night," the other replied.

"Mebbe you never invented anything?"

Murray shook his head.

"Well, you don't want to go into it, for it is mighty poor business. When you go into a man's office fer to show him how he kin collar a fortune, if he will only take an interest in your inventions, the low-lived hound generally boots you out inter the street."

"So I jest made up my mind that the next time I went fer to pour wealth into any galoot's pocket I would start in by getting him into such a fix that he wouldn't feel like kicking me."

"Mebbe you would like to kick me, but you wouldn't try it under the present circumstances, would ye?"

Murray admitted that he would not, and he added that he would not be likely to indulge in

any such luxury as long as the stranger menaced him with a loaded revolver.

"Cert, and that was the little game I reckoned to play!" the other exclaimed.

"Now, then, to come to business. I've got a machine which will reduce the cost of extracting precious metals from ore jest about two-thirds, so that ore which has been thrown aside as worthless kin be worked at a big profit."

Murray looked incredulous and shook his head.

"You don't believe that?"

"No, I don't, for if a man could get up any such machine it would be worth millions to him."

"I've got it, you can bet your boots on it!" the stranger declared triumphantly.

"Say, would you be willing to sign an agreement to pay me fifty thousand dollars and a royalty if I furnish you such a machine?"

Murray was amazed and began to believe that he must be dealing with a madman, although the fellow seemed to be sensible enough.

"Well, yes, I think I would, provided you give me time to pay the money, for fifty thousand dollars is no trifle, and is not to be had every day."

"Have all the time you want. How would five thousand a year for ten years strike you?"

"Oh, that would be all right."

"Hyer's the agreement all drawn out, and as I believe you carry one of them new-fangled pens, you kin sign it right away."

The stranger produced a paper and tossed it to Murray.

Completely amazed at this strange turn of affairs, the speculator examined the document.

It was an agreement, concisely drawn up, stipulating that he was to pay fifty thousand dollars for the use of the "Western Eagle Reduction Machine" in yearly installments of five thousand dollars, on demand, and a royalty of one-tenth of the value received of the ore.

By this time Murray had made up his mind that he was in the hands of a crank, who although sensible enough to get the "drop on him," was crazy in regard to the capabilities of the machine which he had invented.

And as the easiest way to get out of the scrape he signed the agreement.

"Thar you air!" declared the footpad in a tone of delight as he received the signed paper from the speculator.

"Now then, the first thing you know your eternal fortune will be made."

"Have the perliteness to walk on toward the camp. Never mind your belt and revolver. I'll leave it at the Red Elephant works for you. So-long!"

Murray obeyed the injunction, and went on his way full of wonder at the strange adventure.

That he had fallen into the hands of a crank was evident, but who the man was he could not imagine.

He was well acquainted with all the denizens of the camp, but not one of them could he recognize in the person of the footpad.

Altogether it was a most mysterious affair, and the more he reflected upon the matter the greater became his perplexity.

That the man had a machine which could do anything like what he claimed he did not for an instant believe, for long experience had taught him that the claims of an inventor of anything new must be taken with a great deal of caution, for the machines themselves seldom come up to the mark.

Murray was not a man disposed to do much talking and so, when he arrived at the hotel, he kept quiet regarding his strange adventure on his home road.

That the fellow was no ordinary footpad was evident, for he had not made any attempt to get at his valuables.

He stopped into the saloon to get glass of ale before retiring to rest; the loungers, who were congregated in the place, were discussing the subject of road-agents, and the remark was made that none of the fraternity had ever yet made their appearance in the camp or its neighborhood.

The speculator could not repress a grimace as he reflected that he could add to the knowledge of the camp on this subject if he chose to relate the particulars of the strange adventure which had befallen him that night.

Murray was up early in the morning as was his usual custom, and after breakfast took his way to the Red Elephant works.

As he passed the clump of bushes he could not help casting a curious glance at it, as though he expected to see the road-agent again pop forth.

Arriving at the mine he was greeted by the Irishman who was just going off post.

"There's a parcel in the office for yees, Mister Murray."

"For me?"

"Yis, sor."

"Who from?"

"Divil a wan of me know," Casey replied, scratching his head as though the subject puzzled him.

"Who brought it?"

"That is more than I know, too."

"How did it come here?"

"Sorra a wan of me knows."
Here was another mystery evidently.
"Yes; but how did it come in your possession?"

"I found it on the rock beyant."
"On the rock?"
"Yis, sir; where I was afther sitting and smoking my pipe, you know, last night."

"It was a while afther you was gone—about midnight, mebbe—when me tobaccy ran out and I went into me shanty for to git more, and whin I kem back I found the package on the top of the rock where I had been sittin'!"

"Indeed?"
"Yis, sur; it's the blessed truth I am telling you and divil a lie about it, at all, at all!"

"Shure, I wasn't gone five minutes, and who was afther laving the package I dunno."

"How did you know that it was for me?"
"It had your name on it, sur."

"Ah, yes; I see."
"But who the divil brought it is more than I kin tell, unless it was some bird in the air, for I'll go bail that no human passed along this way afther the time that yees left last night."

This assurance was positively given, but Murray had a doubt in regard to its truth.

He knew the Irishman well. Casey was an honest fellow and meant to tell the truth, but he was sadly given to blundering, and was decidedly forgetful.

If he had quitted his post for the purpose of getting a drink of water or a sup of whisky, or a light for his pipe, which was seldom out of his mouth, he would not be apt to recall these little circumstances, and even though he had been absent from his post twice during the night, and had remained away for five minutes at a time, he would not consider that these counted, and would swear in the most emphatic manner that a more vigilant watch than his could not be kept.

Satisfied that the Irishman would stick to his tale and that it would be a waste of time to converse with him longer on the subject, Murray carried the package into the office and there opened it.

As he had expected, it contained the weapon of which he had been robbed by the road-agent on the preceding night.

Murray was perplexed.

What deep game was the unknown playing?

He was no ordinary marauder, that was evident, for he had not demanded his victim's wealth, and what possible use the document could be which the owner of the Red Elephant property had been forced by him to sign was a mystery.

"I suppose the game will develop in time," he remarked, coming to the conclusion that it would be idle to speculate about the matter.

Then he proceeded about his work as usual.

At ten o'clock the foreman of the works made his appearance, his face radiant with joy.

Jimmy McMillen, as the man was called, bore the reputation of being one of the most expert miners in the West; an old hand who had been in chase of the precious dross ever since the days of '49, when in the Californian mill-race the golden sands were discovered.

"We have struck rich ore!" he cried. "A big vein, too, the 'mother' lode, I believe. It will go two hundred to the ton."

The fortune of the Red Elephant man was made.

Just then the door opened and Oriana Marshall made her appearance.

"I have come for justice!" she exclaimed, as she faced the surprised Murray.

CHAPTER XI.

THE DEMAND.

THE big foreman felt that he was in an unpleasant position.

The story of the girl was of course known to all in the camp, for nearly all the dwellers in the town and its suburbs had been witnesses to the dramatic scene which had followed her unexpected arrival in the town of Crested Hill.

She was the sister of the Mexican, Fronteras, who had been killed while endeavoring to hold the property which he claimed was his.

That she should desire to be revenged upon Murray, the man who was in a measure responsible for his death, although he had not taken an active part in the fight, was but natural.

As it had happened, the struggle had ended so quickly that Murray did not have an opportunity to use the rifle with which he was armed.

But there wasn't the least doubt that the girl held him responsible all the same.

And now from the stern expression upon her features, as well as the exclamation which had fallen from her lips when she entered the room, it was plain that she came to "beat up the enemy's quarters," to use the old saying.

The big foreman was as tender-hearted as a woman, and although he did not have a high opinion of the Mexican—he had been in his employ, and had only withdrawn when he saw that there was going to be a fight, being reluctant to have a hand in defying the sheriff—yet he could not help feeling sorry for the girl.

Public opinion in the camp had changed decidedly since the killing of the Mexican.

He had died like a brave man, with his face to the foe, in defense of what he believed to be his property, and now many voices were upraised to say that Murray had been too hasty in calling upon the sheriff, and that it was a rough thing for a man to be shot down in cold blood merely for standing up for what he believed to be right.

Although Jimmy McMillen was not so sure that Fronteras did not deserve what he had got, yet now that he was dead and his sister was all alone in the world, helpless and friendless, it seemed to him as if something ought to be done for her.

The inhabitants of the camp, of course, really knew nothing in regard to how the girl was situated, but they had jumped to the conclusion that she was utterly dependent upon her brother and by his death had been left penniless.

And in all cases of this kind public sympathy is almost always strongly in favor of the woman, particularly in the wild regions of the West, where close communion with nature in her primitive simplicity seems to enlarge the heart of the humans who are seeking to carve out a new fortune far from the haunts of civilization.

That there was a stormy scene ahead seemed to the big foreman extremely probable, and he was not desirous of being a witness to it.

"Thar isn't any doubt 'bout what I was a-telling you," he blurted out awkwardly to Murray, as soon as he could recover from the surprise occasioned by the unexpected appearance of the girl.

"And if anything new turns up I will report."

Then turning to Oriana, he made a clumsy bow, stammered, "Good-morning, miss," and retreated from the office.

"I reckon that gal has come with the idea of making it red-hot for the boss," he muttered, as he retraced his way to his work.

The same thought had occurred to Murray, but with true Scotch doggedness he prepared to meet the storm.

"Allow me to offer you a chair," he said, after the departure of the foreman left him alone with the lady.

But with her outstretched hand she stayed his progress toward the chair.

"Do not trouble yourself, I beg," she exclaimed.

"Oh, it's no trouble. I hate to see a woman stand, and, as I presume, you have not merely come in for the sake of saying, 'How do you do?' I thought you might as well make yourself comfortable while you remained."

The Red Elephant proprietor had been standing when the foreman entered, so the two were on an equality as far as that was concerned.

"Did you hear what I said when I entered, Alexander Murray?" Oriana demanded, her tone full of resolution.

"I did."

"And what reply have you to make?"

"Well, you really have a little advantage of me in this matter; you have taken me by surprise, and I am not exactly prepared to reply."

"The fact is, I am not sure of what you are driving at."

"Why attempt to beat about the bush?" the girl demanded in lofty scorn.

"I said that I came for justice, and can I describe my purpose in plainer words?"

"Justice—from me?"

"Yes."

"I am dull, for I confess I do not understand."

"Did you not kill my brother?"

"No! Not as far as I am concerned, personally, for although I had a rifle in my hand I did not fire a shot in the fight."

"If it had not been for you there would not have been any fight!" Oriana exclaimed, bitterly.

"Granted, but if your brother had not attempted by force of arms to retain a property which the law decided belonged to somebody else, there would not have been any trouble."

"It was his action which forced me to mine. There was a dispute in regard to the ownership of this Red Elephant mine; the courts decided in regard to the matter and I won."

"Then your brother appealed to the strong arm, and in his case the old Scriptural saying was fulfilled:

"He that takes the sword shall perish by the sword."

"It was a cowardly, cruel murder, and I will have revenge!" Oriana cried with the air of a tragedy queen.

An angry light shone in Murray's eyes; he had a hot temper, although usually keeping it well under control, and the accusation of the girl roused his wrath, but he held a rein on himself and answered with a forced calmness, which, even more than a display of open anger, showed how his passions were roused:

"First you want justice and now you clamor for revenge."

"Justice will give me revenge!"

"To come to the point at once, for it is useless for a man to try to wage war with a woman

with tongues for weapons; you have visited me for the purpose of making some demand—what is it?"

"You have killed my brother—by rights, your own life should pay the forfeit."

"That is the old law, you know, 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, life for life!'"

And the manner in which the girl declaimed the speech astonished Murray, who had no idea that any such spirit dwelt within her.

It was the fire of the old Spanish blood which, on the mother's side, came straight from a long line of ancient warriors, who, beneath the gorgeous banner of old Spain had done many a noble deed.

"But I am a woman, and weak enough, though I hunger for revenge, to shrink from bloodshed, therefore I do not seek your life, but you must yield this mine, the cause of the tragedy."

Murray knitted his brows.

"Give up the Red Elephant property?"

"Yes, nothing else will satisfy me!"

"That is utterly impossible. It is mine, all I have in the world is invested in it, and though, perhaps, my title to it, *morally*, is not so clear as it might be yet, *legally*, the keenest lawyer cannot pick a flaw in it."

"You must give it up!"

"To you?"

"Yes, it is the only reparation you can make."

"Oriana, there was a time when there was a tender feeling between us two!" Murray said, abruptly.

"Let the past be forgotten; if my acts have deprived you of a protector take me as your husband for another."

"It is impossible—there is a grave between us," the girl answered, solemnly.

Murray shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, that is all I can do."

"You wish war then?"

"No, but I must meet it if it comes."

From the indifference displayed by the man it was plain that he did not believe that the woman would be able to trouble him much.

"For the last time I ask you, will you yield the Red Elephant property?"

"Oh, no, that is utter nonsense *now*," he replied.

"If you had made the demand an hour ago the chances are great that I should have been inclined to say to you, here, rather than have any trouble, if you can raise a little money, five or ten thousand dollars, enough to give me a fresh start, you can have the Red Elephant and welcome, for I fancied the thing was played out, but since then we have tapped the mother lode, and it will take a hundred thousand dollars now to buy me out."

"And my poor brother was killed right on the threshold of prosperity. A few more hours and he would have been able to raise money enough to have beaten you. But you have not yet paid in full for the mine. There is a claim of my brother's yet to be met."

"Read this paper!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE TRAP.

THE speculator looked at the girl as if he did not at all comprehend her meaning.

The paper which she had produced from her bosom and thrust toward him with a request that he should peruse it, was apparently the half of a quarter page of foolscap paper cut in two in the middle, so that it was something like the shape of a check.

Upon it were a few lines of writing, evidently traced by a woman's hand.

Murray perused the writing, but couldn't, for the life of him, make out what it had to do with the trouble which had procured him the questionable pleasure of a visit from Oriana Marshall.

After glancing over it, he looked at the girl in a questioning sort of way.

"Have you read it?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Well, what have you to say?"

"What have I to say?" Murray exclaimed, completely puzzled.

"Yes, in regard to the paper."

"Well, I haven't anything to say, as far as I know, excepting that I don't see what this bit of paper has to do with the matter in dispute between us two."

"What is it?"

"This paper?"

"Yes, that is what I said; it is a legal document, is it not?"

Murray began to believe that the girl was not quite right in her head—the trouble had affected her brain.

"Well, it is not a legal document at present," he replied.

"It is only a worthless scrap of paper with a few words of writing upon it. It is drawn up in the form of a note, but is without a signature."

"It is a note for fifty thousand dollars, for value received, payable on demand, is it not?"

"Yes, it is."

"What would that note be worth provided your signature was at the bottom of it?" Oriana Marshall exclaimed, rapidly.

Murray looked at her for a moment as though he thought she was taking leave of her senses.

"Well," he answered, after a pause, "if it had my signature at the bottom, as you suggest, it would be worth every dollar that the note calls for, fifty thousand, although I reckon I would have to sell the Red Elephant property to meet it, for I am not carrying round fifty thousand dollars in my pockets nowadays."

"But I say, Oriana, don't fool yourself about this matter. I am not going to sign anything of this kind, you know."

"I am not quite idiot enough to do that, and I really hope that you didn't come here with any such idea in your head, because you cannot work that trick, you know, and if you have any such foolish notion, why, the quicker you give it up the better."

"Oh, no, I haven't any such idea; I know that I could not induce you either by cunning or by force to put yourself so completely in my power as you would be if I held your note for fifty thousand dollars."

"You admit that if such was the case your hold on the Red Elephant property would be but a feeble one."

"Yes, to use a common expression, I should be in a tight place."

"This note is in my handwriting."

"So I supposed."

"It is a copy of one which I found in the money-belt of my brother, which he wore when he was killed, and that note is in your handwriting and signed by you."

This announcement took Murray completely by surprise, and he stared at the girl as though he doubted whether he had understood her correctly or not.

"A note in my handwriting and signed by me?"

"Yes, for fifty thousand dollars."

"Absurd!" Murray exclaimed. "I never gave a note for such a sum as that in my life, I assure you!"

"It is in my possession nevertheless."

"Oh, no, there is some mistake about the matter. Besides, I never gave your brother my note, but always paid him cash when I paid him anything."

"I presume, naturally, that you will not be willing to acknowledge that you gave him the note, but it is in existence, just the same, and I do not think, when the matter comes to be tested in a court of law, that you will be able to deny your own signature."

"Absurd, I tell you!" the speculator exclaimed, angrily.

"There isn't a note of mine in existence in the world! This is some trick, but you will find that it will not work!"

"When the matter comes to be examined and the sunlight of the law is turned upon it the truth will be apparent to every one," the girl replied, in a confident tone.

"I am no lawyer, and all such affairs as this are supposed to be without the range of a woman's mind, but for all that, by simply using common sense, it is perfectly plain to me."

"This note for fifty thousand dollars was given by you to my unfortunate brother in payment for his interest in the Red Elephant mine, and then when the legal papers were executed you managed to get possession of them, and by some hook or crook turned the property over to your associates, so that when he wished to get the money due on the note you had nothing, and the men, who acted as your tools, claimed the property."

"Then, driven to desperation, he determined to resort to force to retain what had been taken from him by fraud."

"You, apparently, had nothing to do with the matter; you were merely agent for the men who carefully kept themselves in the background."

"But when the outrage was perpetrated—when the deed of blood was done, and my poor brother, cold in the embrace of death, was no longer able to reveal to the world the base treachery of which he had been the victim, the men in the background—these paper men, as unsubstantial as the reed forts of the Mongolians, disappeared—and you came forward as the owner of the Red Elephant property."

"But with all your cunning you had not calculated upon this note being in existence; it was worthless, and I presume you thought it had been destroyed, but it is now in my possession, and by its aid I will wrest from you the ill-gotten booty which you dipped your hands in blood to acquire!"

"This is the most ridiculous story possible!" Murray exclaimed, contemptuously.

"No such note exists! Do you suppose I would have been idiot enough to have forgotten it if I had ever drawn such a thing?"

"But it was given a year ago—a year ago yesterday."

Then, with the quickness of the lightning's flash, and almost with the force of a thunderbolt, the truth flashed upon the speculator.

The note to which she referred had been constructed out of the apparently nonsensical agreement which he had signed for the strange footpad who had waylaid him on the previous night.

It was the old trick which has been played upon unsuspecting countrymen by city sharps a hundred times.

The smooth-tongued stranger with his oily ways beguiles the honest farmer into signing an agreement to act as agent for the sale of something or other, a mowing-machine knife or patent saw-sharpener or some small article calculated to sell in a rural community, and the agreement stipulates that the farmer is to pay for the articles as he disposes of them.

The agreement is apparently harmless enough; if the farmer does not sell the goods he need not pay for them; but there is always a certain sum of money expressed in the contract somewhere, and the agreement is so ingeniously worded that by simply cutting in two down the middle the writing on the right-hand side becomes a regular promissory note, calling for the payment of a certain sum of money, for value received, duly signed by the victim.

The swindler sells the note to the nearest bank, who, knowing the farmer to be a responsible man, buys the note, thinking he has made it in the regular course of business.

The bank becomes an innocent holder for value paid, and the farmer is obliged to pay.

Extraordinary as is the swindle the law has decided that the victim must meet the note.

For the moment, Murray was aghast upon perceiving that he had been the victim of so shallow a trick, and rapidly in his mind he reviewed the situation to see if there was any chance to escape from the trap which had ensnared him so cleverly.

For a layman the speculator was well versed in the law.

But upon reviewing the matter in his mind he saw that the scheme had been arranged with exceeding skill.

If he should plead that the note had been obtained from him by fraud, few people would be apt to believe the tale.

So acute a man as himself could not be caught by so contemptible a trick.

The circumstances of the case—his first being interested with Fronteras in the mine, then transferring his interest to a syndicate, and then buying out the others, had been skillfully seized upon to bolster up the plea that the note was good, and the transfer had been for the purpose of swindling the Mexican out of the mine.

And the idea that so skillful, and powerful a blow was dealt by a woman's hand astounded him.

But all the bad elements of his nature were aroused, and he determined to fight to the last.

"Bah!" he cried in well-assumed contempt, "the game is well planned, but it is not strong enough to beat me. I defy you!"

"Go on and do your worst, and since you want war you shall have it."

"Blame yourself and not me if the consequences are unpleasant!"

"It shall be war and war to the knife!" the girl responded, fiercely.

And then she departed with the air of a queen.

"Who is the man that did the trick for her?" Murray cried.

"If I discover who it is I will kill him as sure as my name is Alexander Murray!"

CHAPTER XIII.

A WOMAN SCORNED.

FROM the Red Elephant mine Oriana went straight to the hotel, and when she arrived there she sent word to the Silver Sport that she desired to see him.

The landlord acted as the messenger, and all the interviews between the two took place in the landlord's private apartment, so that suspicion might not be excited by the pair being seen in company.

As the reader has doubtless guessed it was our hero who had devised the ingenious scheme to get a hold upon the speculator.

As he frankly said to Miss Marshall in discussing the matter:

"Of course we are not exactly giving this Murray a fair show for his money, but as far as I can learn, he has never been particularly scrupulous about how he 'got thar' as long as he arrived, so it isn't going much out of the way to give the fellow a twist at his own game."

"Anyhow, it is the only thing we can do—or something in that line."

"In a fair fight we don't stand a ghost of a show, for all the points are in his favor. As far as the law is concerned the thing is settled, and his claim cannot be upset."

"The only chance for us is to get an under-grip by some piece of sharp practice, and then we will be able to make him squeal."

"He will not have any right to complain, for if only half the stories are true which are told of him, he has done the same thing himself a dozen times; so, if in this case he is compelled to take a dose of his own medicine, he ought not to growl."

When in obedience to the landlord's summons the Silver Sport entered the private apart-

ment, he found the girl trembling with excitement.

She had been cool and collected enough during all the interview with Murray, but now that it was over she was extremely nervous.

It was with the greatest difficulty that she calmed herself sufficiently to relate to Highland Wylde the particulars of her interview with the speculator.

When she had finished, he remarked:

"Murray's anger shows that he has discovered he is in a bad box."

"Oh, yes, he sees that he is entrapped."

"And what is more, he doesn't exactly see how he is going to get out of it," the Silver Sport observed.

"Of course it isn't exactly a fair game that we are playing, but it is the best we can do under the circumstances; it is that or none, you see."

"In a fair fight we couldn't get a hold on him."

"What is the next move?" she asked.

"Call in the law-sharps and let them get in their fine work on the note."

"Yes, but that will take time, will it not?" Oriana observed, thoughtfully.

"Oh, you just bet it will!" Wylde exclaimed, emphatically.

"That is the way the legal sharps get their living. If they settled law cases quickly, a good many of them would inevitably starve to death."

"One thing will help us, though. As far as I can find out, Murray is short of money. This having to call on the sheriff to take possession of the Red Elephant property, and being compelled to raise a small army to back him up, cost a heap of money."

"Men don't expose themselves to the risk of being killed, even in Arizona, without being well paid for it."

"Now you have plenty of cash to carry on the fight, while he is far from being in funds, and that certainly gives you a tremendous advantage."

"In a lawsuit it is a great deal as Napoleon remarked when some one observed that a certain party had the right on their side:

"Providence is generally on the side of the heaviest artillery."

"Ah, but you are wrong about his lack of wealth."

"Oh, no!" Highland Wylde exclaimed.

"I had it from good authority. The ore has been gradually running poorer and poorer, and lately it has hardly been worth the taking out."

"That is all changed now; they struck the mother lode this morning."

The Silver Sport gave utterance to a prolonged whistle.

"The deuce you say!" he exclaimed.

"Well, our cake is all dough, then, as far as the advantage of being well heeled with money is concerned."

"Yes, but how long do you suppose this legal fight will last—a month?" she demanded, impatiently, knitting her beautiful brows, and pressing her pearly teeth upon her rich red under lip until the blood almost came.

"A month!" the Silver Sport echoed.

"Why, it will take a month for them to fairly get hold of the case."

"The chances are that if Murray is well provided with money it will be a year before any decision is reached, for if he is beaten in the first struggle, he will keep appealing the case to higher courts."

"A legal struggle for so large a sum as fifty thousand dollars will sometimes run for years."

"My idea was that we could catch him unprepared for a long and expensive lawsuit. I knew he was short of money, for he has been running behind on his payments, and my reckoning was that if we slapped a lawsuit at him the rest of his creditors would become alarmed for their money and go for him too."

"That is the way it generally acts, you know. When a man commences to go down hill almost every one is always ready to help him along with a vigorous kick."

"Oh, I cannot possess my soul in patience to wait for the slow progress of a tardy lawsuit!" Oriana exclaimed, rising to her feet, and pacing impatiently up and down the room with the restless motion of a caged tigress.

The Silver Sport saw that with the inconsistency, popularly supposed to be a part and parcel of all womankind, the girl was working herself into a passion about a thing that could not be helped.

And as experience had taught him that it was only a waste of time to attempt to argue in such cases he held his peace.

"No, no, I cannot possess my soul with patience to wait!" she exclaimed.

"And then I am not certain either that in the end I will triumph. This unforeseen stroke of good fortune which has come to the man I hate—this finding of the mother vein—may serve to defeat my vengeance."

"It is not improbable."

"I must have immediate action! I thirst for the blood of this man. He must perish by the sword which he has seized."

"You are an expert with all weapons, they say, and fearless of danger. You must seek a quarrel with this man and kill him!"

Now, although our hero was a pretty cool hand, this blunt proposition astounded him, and he hesitated to reply.

It was plain that the girl was a prey to the most violent rage, and under such circumstances some allowance ought to be made.

"You surely do not fear to meet this wily wretch in single fight?" the girl exclaimed, her eyes flashing angry fires, when she found that the other hesitated.

"Oh, no."

"You must kill him then, and if you perform the task, ask of me what you will, even myself, and I will not refuse, for I will gladly marry the man who slays this murderer."

It was plain that the ugly Mexican blood was in the ascendancy, and the girl was reckless in her thirst for vengeance.

As the only way to get out of the scrape Highland Wylde determined to speak plainly.

In a measure he had been fascinated by the girl's beauty in the beginning, and so had been induced to lend his aid to further her scheme of vengeance, but this unexpected development satisfied him that Oriana Marshall was not the kind of a girl he wanted.

"I couldn't do that sort of thing, you know," the Silver Sport remarked, quietly.

"I was willing to strain a point and trick the man if the means I used were not just what they ought to be."

"He is an adventurer—a speculator, plays a sharp game himself whenever he has the chance and so has no right to complain if an enemy tries to trip him in the same way, but when you ask me to play the part of a bravo—to seek this man and induce him to quarrel for the sake of killing him, you make a mistake. I am no such ruffian, and although I hold it no sin for a man to defend himself when assailed, yet not for all the gold that was ever mined in California would I provoke a quarrel for the sole purpose of killing my opponent."

These plainly spoken words irritated Oriana, and her face grew dark with anger.

"Hades hath no fury like a woman scorned," and now herself and fortune were rejected by this adventurer upon whom, under other circumstances, she would have disdained to cast a glance.

Her savage Mexican blood was aroused, and the rejection of her offer by the Silver Sport so enraged her that she felt she fairly hated him.

"You are not the kind of man whom a woman should select as her champion to fight her battles!" she exclaimed, in contempt.

"Not the man to be induced to commit a cold-blooded murder by the best woman that ever trod the earth," Highland Wylde replied, decidedly.

"Enough!" she cried, imperiously.

"In the future we will be as strangers to each other. You can keep my secret or disclose it, as you please, it is immaterial to me!"

"I am no talker, and your secret is safe in my possession."

And then with a polite bow the Silver Sport took his departure.

Having nothing else to do he strolled out of the camp and up the trail by the river.

A few minutes took him clear of the town, and then as he walked on, meditating upon the strange moods of the angry woman who had so abruptly dismissed him, he encountered a stranger—a miner evidently, by his dress—a man of gigantic size, and he came upon him just at a bend in the trail where it turned to the right following the course of the stream.

The moment the man caught sight of the Silver Sport he yelled like a madman:

"You're my mutton, dog-gone yer, for keeps!"

And he rushed at the astonished spot with the fury of a wild beast, extending his arms and evidently intending to grasp Highland Wylde with a bear-like hug.

CHAPTER XIV.

BUCK BEAVER.

THE man was a decided character; there wasn't the least doubt about that.

A regular giant-like fellow, standing over six feet high and broad in proportion. A huge, unwieldy mountain of flesh.

Long-haired and long-bearded, and his birch-rod appendages the color of a lion's tawny mane. A fellow who once seen would not be apt to be speedily forgotten.

The attack was so totally unexpected that the Silver Sport had no time to prepare for resistance, but for all that he was not caught napping, although as he nerved himself for the encounter the thought flashed upon his mind that the stranger was a lunatic or else he would never have made such an unprovoked attack upon him.

As we have said, it was evidently the idea of the unknown to grasp the Silver Sport in a bear-like hug, and he made his rush so unexpectedly that our hero had scant time for preparation.

Notwithstanding, he received the attack in a manner that astounded his assailant.

He did not attempt to jump back, or to put up his hands for the purpose of striking a blow, but he simply ducked his head and as the big fellow rushed upon him butted him, goat-fashion.

And the stroke was delivered with such force that the man went over headlong on the flat of his back, all the fight, and wind, knocked out of him for the moment.

"Ah, oo, ow!" he gasped, as he struck the ground, and then he rolled over and began to slowly scramble to his feet.

The Silver Sport did not attempt to follow up his advantage, as he was anxious to ascertain why the stranger attacked him, there not being the slightest reason for such a thing.

The man's personality was strongly marked, and Highland Wylde felt quite sure that he had never encountered the fellow before.

At last the giant got on his feet, puffing and blowing like a porpoise.

Placing his hands upon his hips he surveyed the Silver Sport with a great deal of curiosity.

"Say! wot kind of a man air you, anyway?" he cried.

"Well, I'm a pretty good man, as mengo, I am told by those who know me," the Silver Sport answered.

"You are the fighter, ain't you—the galoot wot makes other galoots take water?"

"I believe I generally manage to hold my own when it comes to a skirmish."

"Do you call that fightin'—bucking a man in the stumjack like a durned William-goat?" cried the stranger, with an air of great dignity.

"Do you call it fighting to rush on a man like a mad bull without giving him any warning?" the Silver Sport retorted.

"Wa-al, you're a fighter, ain't yer? and it's my notion that fighters ought to be allers ready for war."

"I reckon I fill the bill, then, for you got all you wanted, unless I am very greatly mistaken."

"You took a mean advantage of me to buck me like a bamed big horned sheep," the stranger answered, angrily.

"And I want you to understand that I don't call that air the square deal, and don't you forget it."

"Stranger, you were so quick on me that I had to do the best I could."

"Say! you're the Silver Sport, ain't yer?" cried the other, abruptly.

"Yes, that is what men call me."

"Wa-al, chew me up fer hash! if I ever see'd any sich a jack-a-dandy as you ar' afore!"

"Waugh!" and the big fellow gave utterance to a snort of contempt.

"Jes' look at his curls! fer all the world like a bamed fool-gal!"

"And you call yerself a war-hoss, with sich truck as that. Wa-al, now, if this don't beat my time, you kin mash me with pancakes!"

"Say, do you know who I am?"

"Stranger, I am a new-comer in this section and I am not as well-posted as I ought to be, but from your appearance I should say you was a cross between a grizzly bear and a woolly horse."

"Aho—oo—wow!" and with this guttural exclamation, the stranger, having by this time recovered his breath, began to prance up and down like a turkey on a hot plate.

"I'm the rustler from Show Low, the sweet-scented poppy of the old Mogollon Range, my name is Buck Beaver, and I can whip my weight in wilcats!"

"I've heard of you, I have, and I hev come all the way from the bran-new camp of Show Low to cut yer comb and put a stop to yer little kanky panky tricks."

"I am willing to own up that ye kinder got the best of me on the furst buckle, but one fly don't make a fight, and mighty few hosses, I reckon, are cute enough to win the race on the first heat."

The mystery was out now.

Our hero had heard of the town of Show Low before.

It was a little settlement on one of the headwaters of the Zuni River, but what kind of a place it was the Silver Sport knew not.

Some traveler had carried to the town the report of how he had succeeded in vanquishing the boxers, and the result was that the intelligence had fired the soul of this local champion with a desire to cross the Mogollon Range and meet him in single fight.

Like as in the days of old, a knight, renowned in arms, was always eager to find some other knight, equally renowned, with whom he might try his skill.

"Well, Mister Buck Beaver, although I am not going around with a chip on my shoulder, looking for a quarrel, yet I am always ready to do my prettiest when any stranger comes along who thinks he is a better man than I am."

"So hump yourself and come at me as soon as you like."

"Is it to be a fair fight—a reg'lar stand-up-and-knock-down, or a rough-and-tumble, catch-as-catch-can? Wrestling is my best holt, you know?"

"I'm a man who can lug a bear to death!"

"Any way you like—suit yourself and you will suit me."

"Hyer's for ye, then, and I give you fair warning, I'm a-going for to mash you flatter'n a pancake!"

And with this exclamation the giant rushed at the Silver Sport, swinging his huge fists like a windmill.

Highland Wylde understood the kind of man with whom he had to deal.

A fellow whose only gift was strength—whose sole idea of a fight was to rush in and crush his foe by brute force as soon as possible.

Incumbered as he was with many pounds of useless fat, the fact was apparent to a good general like King Dandy that all he had to do was to keep out of his opponent's way for a few moments, let him waste his strength on the empty air—and it often tires a man more to hit at nothing than if his blow fell on a solid substance—and then he would be at the mercy of his scientific antagonist.

And on this plan the Silver Sport acted.

As the giant rushed at him, striking out in the most vicious manner, Highland Wylde gave ground, retiring gradually though and apparently trying to return his antagonist's blows.

But this was all a sham, for while he was careful to parry the lustily-delivered strokes, he was really making no effort to punish his assailant.

Three minutes of this kind of work brought the big fellow to a standstill, his breath giving out.

And then, "taking the measure" of his man with the utmost coolness, the Silver Sport sent in a straight right-hander, which, alighting full in the throat, staggered the big fellow backward, and then, throwing the whole weight of his body into the stroke in the most scientific manner, the expert boxer delivered a most terrible blow with his left hand which, alighting just over the heart, seemed to almost crack the ribs upon which it fell.

Over went the big fellow, "knocked out" by the terrific blow.

It was fully three minutes before the giant recovered sufficiently to sit up, and when he did he looked around him in a dazed sort of way.

He had been in many a hard battle in his time, but never before had he received such a stroke.

"Gosh!" he ejaculated, at last; "say, pard, wot on airth did you hit me with?"

For answer the Silver Sport held up his two fists.

Not remarkable for their size, but they were compact and apparently as hard as iron.

"Hain't got a pile-driver hid around yer clothes somewhar, have ye?" Buck Beaver asked with perfect seriousness, as he rose to his feet.

"Not that I know of."

And then, throwing himself into position, he called:

"Time!"

"Oh, no; not any more in mine, thank you. I've got all I want," the giant cried.

"I ain't no hog, and when I meet a better man than myself I'm allers willing to own it."

"But I say, pard, for the love of goodness jes' keep quiet 'bout this yere picnic. I'm a-going to work hyer in this Red Elephant Mine, and if this leetle biz gits out the boys will make it so hot for me that I won't be able for to stay in the town."

"It was my idee, you see, for to climb you the fust thing, and then I could go a-chinning round that I was a chief."

"The speculation has bu'sted, and I reckon I will have to take a back seat in this yere camp while you are 'round."

"Oh, that's all right," the champion replied.

"I bear no malice, pard; you're too much for me, and that is all thar is to it; so long."

And so they parted; Buck Beaver to continue on his way to the town, while the Silver Sport followed the trail up the Salt River.

CHAPTER XV.

AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE.

ALEXANDER MURRAY sat in his office, and his meditations were far from being pleasant ones.

The determination with which the woman pursued him was a serious matter.

"Mighty strange creatures these women are," he muttered communing with himself.

"In the East I was sure the girl loved me, for she as good as made the soft confession a hundred times."

"But now comes up this fight for the mine and, hey presto! the love vanishes into thin air, and she suddenly develops into the most bitter and unrelenting enemy I have in the world."

"Of course the death of her brother is the cause of it, and for that tragedy she blames me."

"There isn't a doubt that if I hadn't attacked the mine he would be alive to-day, but then, as far as that goes, it was a fair fight."

"He would have killed me if he could, and gladly too, while I didn't really seek his death. All I wanted was the mine."

"This fight with the girl is mighty awkward, and just as we have struck a big lead too, and

then the way that note business was played on me, beats all that I have ever heard of in my time.

"Curse the infernal luck!" and at this point Murray arose and began to pace up and down the room.

"To think that a man like myself should be fooled by so shallow a trick!

"But who is the man in the background—he that played road-agent and got the bulge on me in such an infernal crafty fashion?

"Apparently the woman is alone, but it is plain that she has a confederate and he is a bold fellow too, and a cunning one also, or else he could never have devised and carried out such a plot."

As he reached this conclusion Murray happened to pause by the window and glance out.

The tall figure of a stranger conversing with the Irish watchman at the gate attracted his attention.

The man was roughly dressed after the frontier fashion, but despite his soiled and poor garb, had a sort of dashy air.

"It seems to me I know that fellow, although the old hat he wears pulled down so low over his forehead half-hides his face, and then his stubby beard is a disguise too."

And this was the truth, for the stranger did not seem as if he had been shaved for a month at least.

Then noticing that the Irishman was directing him to the office, Murray observed:

"I shall soon know who he is, for Paddy is sending him up here."

"Probably some miner in search of a job, but it is odd I can't place the man, for both face and figure are familiar."

Then Murray resumed his seat, to receive the stranger.

The door opened and the other made his appearance.

"Mr. Murray?" he remarked in a tone of inquiry.

"That is my name."

The stranger entered, surveyed the speculator for a moment with his clear, bold eyes, which were really gray in color, but had the appearance of being jet-black a few yards away.

"I reckon you don't remember me, Mr. Murray," the man said at last.

"Well, I think you rather have the advantage of me," the other replied, puzzled at not being able to recall the particulars of his acquaintance with the stranger, for that he had met him before Murray was certain.

Slowly the stranger lifted his hat, and when the high, broad forehead was revealed, on which the seam of a scarlet scar appeared on the right side, close to the roots of the hair, the speculator uttered a cry of amazement.

"Bill Colorado, as I am a sinner!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, the same old Bill, although not in quite so fine feather as in the days of yore."

"The world has not gone well with you then?"

"Well, I haven't any reason to complain until the last year, and then at one fell swoop I was clean busted. But I say, according to all accounts, you have done pretty well out here in this wild Western region."

"Pretty fairly."

"I heard of you clear 'way off in Santa Fé, and they talked of you as a man likely to loom up as a bonanza king one of these days."

"Well, I have no reason to grumble at the way that luck has run with me during the past fifteen years."

"It is just about fifteen years since we parted company, and you don't look a day older."

"I have taken care of myself. I have been all straight and right—on the 'square,' you know—ever since we parted."

"Yes, I know, that was your idea when we separated. You said you didn't believe the crooked business paid and that you were going to turn over a new leaf—no more gambling—no more crookedness of any kind."

"Well, I have lived right up to that idea."

"And prospered, while I followed the old lay and am here down on my luck and flat broke."

"But I say, old pal, I didn't come with any idea of troubling you," the stranger exclaimed, abruptly.

"I had a curiosity, when I heard your name and got your description, to see if you were the same old Alex Murray that I knew in the East, and then I heard, too, that you wanted hands, and I thought that even if you wasn't the Murray I knew, there might be a chance to get a job, although I am a far better poker-player than miner."

"Oh, that is all right; I'm glad to see you; sit down and make yourself comfortable!" the speculator exclaimed, heartily.

"I am not the kind of a man to go back on an old pal, simply because I have prospered and he has not."

"Alex, you always were a square fellow," the other remarked, as he helped himself to a chair.

"And how are all the boys, by the way?"

"All gone to blazes, with the exception of myself, Gray Ed and Parson John, and the most of them, too, were cut down in the flower of their youth; the sheriff got some, hot lead

and cold steel settled others, and we three who have escaped have been obliged to emigrate."

"We left our country for our country's good!" Murray nodded; he understood the situation.

"Gray Ed was the first to come out in this section, and he wrote to Parson John and myself at Santa Fé that this was the country for business, so we came on."

"The Parson is about played out, though. He isn't long for this world. He has drank too much whisky and the hardships of this wild life are too much for him."

"Where is he now?"

"In a little hut that we ran across up in the hills. I left him there while I took a look at the town."

"Gray Ed was to meet me here to-night, and as he has been hanging around this section for some time, he will be able to give us some points."

While the new-comer had been speaking, a bright idea had suddenly flashed into the speculator's mind.

Oriana Marshal was employing underhand means to get the best of him; now here were tools ready to his hand who could be used in the same way.

Bill Colorado was a cool, dashing, unscrupulous fellow; a born leader of men, but so thrifless and extravagant that he never saved any of the gains which his quick wits secured.

Such a man, secretly devoted to his service, would be invaluable, to say nothing of the other two who, as Murray well knew, were blades of rare metal.

"See, old fellow, I think I can put you in the way of a job—I think I can find use for all three of you, and if we come to an arrangement you will get such a start that you will be sure to go ahead afterward."

"That is just the game I am eager to chip into!" the other declared.

"I told you that for fifteen years I have been on the square and prospered thereby."

Colorado nodded.

"When I said that I mean I have kept within the law, so that no one ever has had the chance to get at me."

"I understand the situation perfectly; you have robbed in a legal manner. A much more pleasant way to do the trick than to get outside the law with the danger of the officers getting on your track."

"Yes, no doubt about that. But now as it happens, the situation is a little strained and there is trouble ahead."

And then at full length Murray explained exactly how he was situated.

"You are in a rather ugly position," Captain Colorado observed, after a few moments' deliberation.

We give the adventurer the title by which he was usually known.

Colorado, of course, was an assumed name; but no one knew what his right name was.

"This girl is a Mexican and now since her brother's death she appears to hate you fully as much as before she seemed to love you?"

"That is it exactly."

"These Mexican women are queer cattle,"

Captain Colorado observed, thoughtfully.

"I have had experience with a few of them in Santa Fé, and I discovered that you can't judge them by the same rules that would apply to an American or an English girl."

"They are fiery and passionate by nature and quickly fly from one extreme to the other."

"Now, then, this girl is in such a state that she hungers for revenge."

"Yes."

"Desperate diseases require desperate remedies."

"So in this case you must take the bull by the horns. Come the Roman-Sabine business over again. Abduct the girl and marry her. Parson John can tie the knot as well as any preacher in the land."

"He is a regularly-ordained minister, you know, although he hasn't had a church for years, but he can celebrate a legal marriage for all that."

"When you have made the girl yours, and the affair is so arranged that it appears as if she has eloped with you, when she comes to understand the matter the odds are great that there will be a sudden revulsion in her feelings and she will conclude to make the best of the situation."

The scheme was so bold that at the first glance it appeared to be impossible to carry it to a successful termination.

But the more Murray reflected upon the plan the more feasible it appeared, and finally he decided to attempt it.

It was a lucky chance for him that had brought Captain Colorado's wandering footsteps to the camp of Crested Hill.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE ABDUCTION.

As the reader will remember, Oriana had flown into a violent fit of rage when the Silver Sport had declined to play the bravo's part and undertake the assassination of Alexander Murray.

And his abrupt departure when she dismissed him angered her still more.

The pride of the haughty beauty was touched. Here she had offered to give herself to the man if he would only undertake her mission of vengeance, and he had coldly refused.

Rejected the hand of the girl for whose love some of the great men of the country had sued.

This man was adding insult to injury, and for the moment the proud and imperious beauty hardly knew which one of the two men she hated most, Alexander Murray, whom she regarded as the slayer of her brother, or this adventurer whom she had chosen for a tool, but who so speedily had assumed the airs of a master.

There was a secret thought in her heart, though, that when the Silver Sport came to reflect upon the matter he would see how foolishly he had acted in rejecting the love of so peerless a beauty as herself and would seek her presence, prepared to do her bidding.

But as time passed on and he came not, and she noticed that he was not visible around the hotel, curiosity impelled her to ask the old Kentuckian what had become of him.

But all she could learn was that he had bought a shotgun and gone up in the hills after game.

It was plain; the Silver Sport had made his decision and intended to stick to it.

Greater and greater grew the rage of the girl, and she caught herself vowing that she would be revenged upon the man who had so wantonly scorned her before she was many days older.

Meanwhile her desire for vengeance upon Murray languished, for in her volatile heart there was not room for two great passions to exist simultaneously.

At the same time Captain Colorado had not been idle.

In the guise of a miner, anxious to get a share in some good property, he had made the Old Kentucky Home his headquarters and so had contrived to learn all the particulars needed for the successful carrying out of the scheme which he had in view.

Oriana occupied an apartment in the rear of the hotel on the second floor.

The house was constructed as cheaply as possible, for in all such frontier camps building materials are extremely dear.

The lock upon the door was only a common, cheap affair, which any experienced burglar could easily pick with a piece of wire, and the portal was not even guarded by a belt.

Captain Colorado was a man who did not believe in letting the grass grow under his feet, and so on the third night after the one which brought to a close the day when he had made his appearance in the camp of Crested Hill, the attempt to abduct the girl was made.

The dashing captain was an old hand at this sort of thing, for in the East he had won a certain kind of renown as the leader of a band of desperate and expert cracksmen, in addition to bearing the reputation of being one of the greatest gamblers known to the police.

Captain Colorado waited until about three o'clock in the morning, the hour when sleep is said to hang heaviest upon human eyelids, and then, with the cautious tread of the panther, stole from his room, which was right opposite to the apartment occupied by Oriana, and descending to the lower hall, which ran through the center of the house, unlocked the door in the rear of the building.

Stealing forth into the night—it was dark, for heavy clouds hid the light of the moon—he went straight for about a hundred yards, then halted and whistled cautiously.

From the gloom beyond came an answering whistle, and then a man, a giant in size, made his appearance, leading two horses.

"Picket the beasts and come with me, Ed," the captain commanded.

A pin was soon driven into the ground and the steeds tethered to it by a lariat.

Then the two men, with cautious tread, made their way to the hotel, entered the building and ascended the stairs.

When they arrived at the door of Oriana's room, the captain produced a square tin oyster-box, in which a candle was placed to serve as a dark-lantern, lit the candle and then proceeded to gain an entrance to the girl's room.

To an old hand like the Eastern burglar this was an easy matter, and when the two were within the room the imitation dark-lantern enabled them to see what they were about.

Oriana was sleeping soundly, and the abductors were enabled to proceed in their design, all being in readiness for the accomplishment of the scheme.

A gag was provided which was forced into the mouth of the slumbering girl and securely fastened.

Then, before she was really aware of what had aroused her so rudely from her sleep, so dextrously was the operation performed, she was securely rolled in the coarse gray blanket which formed the covering of the bed, and a lariat passed around it so she was securely bound.

With scant ceremony then the giant-like fel-

low raised the girl in his arms and carried her down the stairs, the captain following, after having made a bundle of the girl's clothes which he brought along with him, first depositing a letter, addressed to the landlord, upon the table.

The two, with the captive girl, proceeded to the horses, mounted, and in five minutes were clear of the camp of Crested Hill.

Away they went, pushing their horses into a gallop, upon getting away from the town, and after an hour's sharp ride drew rein by the side of an old ranch up in the foothills.

This was the same house where the Silver Sport had sought shelter when he had lost his way on his homeward ride from Tucson.

And the giant-like fellow who had carried the girl in his strong arms was the long-bearded wretch who had essayed to play the rôle of a strangler, and from whom the Silver Sport escaped in so marvelous a manner.

Edmund Carson the girl, Patience, had called her father, but these companions in crime of his knew him better as Gray Ed, the name applied on account of his long gray hair and beard.

The girl was not at the ranch when the horsemen arrived with their captive, but Alexander Murray and a coarse, dissipated-looking old man, whose health was evidently none of the best, occupied the apartment where Highland Wylde had met with so strange an adventure.

The girl was deposited in a chair, all bound and gagged as she was, and Murray hastened to her side as though fearful that she had suffered during the ride.

But she had been handled in the gentlest manner, although some violence had been necessary.

Murray cut the gag and gave her back the use of her speech.

"What is the meaning of this outrage?" she demanded, with flashing eyes.

"All right, don't be in such a hurry, I will perform the ceremony as soon as possible," exclaimed the old reprobate, rising and endeavoring to assume as ministerial an air as possible, and pretending to be deaf so as not to understand the girl's angry words.

"Ceremony—what ceremony?" Oriana cried, in amazement.

"The marriage ceremony," Murray hastened to explain.

"This gentleman is a regularly ordained minister, although he is not in very good feather just now, but you need not be alarmed at that."

"There is not the least doubt that he can perform the ceremony as well as any minister in the land."

"I trust, Oriana, you will forgive me this rough wooing, but, under the circumstances, it was all that was left me."

"You were the only woman I have ever loved and I could not bear to give you up. I felt that you must be my wife, and if I could not win you by fair means, what else was left me but some desperate device of this kind?"

Then, just at this point, there was a sudden interruption to the proceedings.

CHAPTER XVII.

A WOMAN'S WHIM.

In through the door stalked the Silver Sport, his trusty revolvers in his hands, the hammers raised ready for action.

"You didn't send me an invitation, but I thought I would come, just the same," he remarked.

All were taken completely by surprise, but the most astonished of the party was Gray Ed, who, in the Silver Sport, recognized the stranger who had escaped from his clutches in such a mysterious manner.

Naturally the men clapped their hands upon their weapons, excepting Murray.

The speculator realized that the game was up, and with his usual shrewdness, saw it would be useless to attempt to contend with the Silver Sport, although they were four to one against him.

But his revolvers were drawn, ready for action, and that neutralized the advantage in numbers which they possessed.

"Gentlemen, don't finger your weapons unless you are anxious to start a graveyard in this neighborhood."

"I am quick on the trigger, prompt to act, a pretty good shot, and the chances are about a million to one that I couldn't miss my men at this distance."

The promptness with which the others took their hands from the neighborhood of their weapons was wonderful.

They believed the Silver Sport would be as good as his word, and they did not intend to throw away their lives without reason.

Under such circumstances it would be naturally supposed that a cry of joy would come from the lips of the girl, but she made no sound, and really seemed to be the most indifferent person in the apartment.

There was a strange, peculiar look in her dark eyes though, as she gazed upon the Silver Sport.

"Now, then, I want you pilgrims to lay down

your weapons, one by one, you understand," the sharp continued.

"Put them down on the floor and don't try any monkey business, for if I catch any one of you trying any gum games I will plug him so quickly that he will be in the other world before he knows what hurt him."

"Wait a moment; let me understand something of this matter!" exclaimed the girl, imperiously.

"How comes it that you have happened to my rescue in this timely manner?"

"Have you been keeping a watch over me?"

"Nary time," responded the Silver Sport, promptly.

"You can thank that gray-headed and gray-bearded old sinner over there," and as he spoke he pointed to Gray Ed.

"I was foolish enough to accept his hospitality one night when I chanced to wander up this way, and he gave a right royal reception."

"First he drugged, and then he tried to strangle me, but my 'medicine' was too strong for him, and when he had the silken cord around my neck I contrived to give him an electric shock which rather astonished his weak nerves."

All looked perplexed at the strange announcement, and none more than the old scoundrel, who had been taxing his brain ever since the wonderful escape of his prey to account for it.

"Then it is purely by accident that you are here?" Oriana demanded.

"Purely accidental; but what difference does it make to you, so that you are saved from the designs of this gentle Red Elephant man, who has adopted about as novel a method of wooing as the world has ever heard of."

The last lingering hope which had sprung up in the mind of the proud, imperious girl vanished.

Her first idea when the Silver Sport so unexpectedly made his appearance, was that he had changed his mind about performing her commands and was keeping a lover-like watch upon her, so as to take advantage of some favorable opportunity to tell her she could reckon upon his services.

But now that she discovered that there wasn't the least foundation for the surmise, the dislike which had taken possession of her, when she found her charms were not potent enough to win the bold and daring sharp to do her will, increased, and she came to a sudden determination not to be indebted to the man who had scorned her love, in any way.

There was only one course for her to pursue, though, by means of which she could escape placing herself under obligations to him, and though it seemed that, like the Ancient Mariner, she only steered from one rock to run upon another, yet, urged on by the intense feeling of hatred which she now entertained for Highland Wylde, she did not hesitate to take the bold step.

"I am very much obliged to you for coming so timely to my assistance, although as it happens I am not in any particular danger."

"Mr. Alexander Murray and myself are old-time lovers, and though I admit that, with the caprice of my sex, I have not treated him as he ought to have been treated, yet I am sure he would rather die than do me harm."

The girl was perfectly self-possessed when she made the announcement, and even smiled at the man who had taken so strange a way to win her.

All within the room stared in amazement. Even the cool-headed Silver Sport looked astonished, although, being something of a philosopher, he always maintained that no one ought to be amazed at anything that a woman might do.

"Is this man really a minister and competent to perform a legal marriage ceremony?" the girl asked, abruptly.

Murray hastened to assure her that there wasn't the least doubt in regard to that, and the disreputable-looking fellow chimed in with the remark:

"Don't you be afeard about that, honey. I'm a sure-enough dominie and don't you forget it! I gathered the sheep into the fold for many a year down in Southern Illinois, until trouble riz and I was obliged to emigrate."

"I am a weak vessel, but my only fault is that I hanker arter the wine when it is red, and that's the reason why I am a wandering shepherd without any flock. But when it comes to hitching a pair in the bonds of wedlock, I reckon I kin tie the knot as fast as any parson in the world."

This positive assurance appeared to remove the girl's doubts, and casting her brilliant dark eyes upon Murray, she exclaimed:

"Alexander Murray, you know me better than I know myself, and when you schemed to woo me in this strange way, you took the right course to secure my fickle heart."

"A man like you who dares to do a desperate deed for the woman he loves is the man for me, and before all these witnesses I now gladly declare that I have not the least objection to taking you for my husband, and I am perfectly willing that the ceremony shall take place as soon as possible."

This announcement took everybody by sur-

prise, although, from her manner, the dullest-witted man present could see that she was about to take some important action.

"Proceed, sir," Oriana continued after a moment's pause addressing herself to the "dominie," "go on with the ceremony, and although this garb in which I am now arrayed is not exactly the thing for a wedding-dress, yet I trust that under the circumstances the company will have the goodness to excuse it."

And as she spoke she surveyed the blanket in which she was wrapped with eyes full of merriment, and at the close of the speech broke out into a loud laugh.

The Silver Sport understood that the lady had reference to him when she spoke of a man who dared to do a desperate deed, but as he did not take the least interest in the woman, for with all her beauty she had not succeeded in insinuating his heart, he was not affected by the covert sneer.

The parson performed the ceremony, and from the easy way in which he rattled through the service it was plain to be seen that it was a job which he had often performed.

When it was done, and the pair made man and wife, the Silver Sport made haste to withdraw.

"Sorry I interfered," he observed, "but as 'all's well that ends well,' there's no harm done."

"I wish you all sorts of luck, so-long."

And then Highland Wylde retreated.

"You must kill that man for me!" the proud beauty whispered in the ear of her new-made husband.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE DETERMINATION.

"THAT woman fairly hates the sight of me," the Silver Sport observed after he had gained the open air.

"The look that she gave me as I departed was full of malice. I must be on my guard, for she may try to do me mischief."

"Having failed to use me as a tool, she may take into her head that she is entitled to revenge because I wouldn't do her bidding."

"Some women are queer creatures, and this one is certainly about as singular a specimen as I ever ran across."

"She was just crazy to have me kill this Murray in cold blood, because he was the cause of her brother's death, although that was really not so for he brought his fate upon himself."

"Now, after being abducted by this man, she turns right around and marries him."

"The general impression in regard to her brother, the Mexican, was that he could not be trusted, being as unstable as the wind, and after this affair to night I am inclined to hold to the opinion that the sister is as bad as the brother."

"She doesn't like me because I would not turn bravo for her sweet sake, and now she is quite capable of trying to make trouble for me, but if she succeeds she will have to be smarter than I am, and I don't believe she is."

As will be perceived from this remark the Silver Sport was not inclined to underrate his abilities any more than those of a foe with whom he was to contend.

So, as he went on his way, his active mind was busy in devising ways to protect himself from the attack which he anticipated would be made.

After the Silver Sport left the apartment all the men followed his example, and the bride made haste to array herself in a more suitable dress than the rather peculiar one which, under the circumstances, she had been compelled to wear.

Then she, escorted by Murray, departed for Crested Hill.

Captain Colorado, Gray Ed, and Parson John remained in the cabin.

The captain had taken the precaution to bring a quart flask of whisky with him, and as Gray Ed had some crackers and cheese in his larder, the ruffians were enabled to enjoy a feast as they discussed the strange events which had occurred.

The gray-bearded giant built a huge fire on the hearth and the outlaws squatted down by it on buffalo-ropes.

"It was a mighty funny thing that I happened to run across you out in this wilderness," the captain remarked to Gray Ed.

The three, in conjunction with others, had formerly belonged to the same gang of ruffians, operating in a more civilized country than the one they were now in, but the law-officers had raided the outlaws and the gang had been forced to disperse.

"Yes; and I call it a stroke of luck, too, for now we will be able to do some business," observed the giant, rubbing his hands together gleefully.

"One man, you know, cannot do much, and as this neighborhood is settling up fast and all the mines and miners are making money, a wise little gang, such as we will make, ought to do well."

"Yes; there ain't the least doubt about that," Captain Colorado remarked.

"And this ranch of yours is beautifully situated for business."

"Yes, yes, beautifully situated," Parson John chimed in, at the same time helping himself so liberally to the whisky that the outlaw leader felt compelled to interfere.

"Hold on there, parson!" he cried.

"Dog-gone it! don't take a half-pint at a swallow—do you s'pose we have a whole barrel hyer on tap on purpose for you to make a beast of yourself?"

"Oh, well, I didn't mean to take so much, but, cap'n, my throat is as dry as an ash-heap."

"You must remember that we have been on short allowance for some time now, and when you come to consider the matter, what is one quart of whisky among three such men as we are?"

"Hang me if I don't believe I could get away with the whole of it myself!"

"Not the least doubt of it!" retorted the other. "But you won't do it this time, if I know myself."

And having rescued the flask from Parson John's clutches the captain went on with his conversation.

"Let me see, it is nigh onto five years since we were compelled to dust out of old Missouri so lively," said Captain Colorado.

"Yes, just about."

"What has become of that daughter of yours?"

"Patience?"

"Yes, I reckon that is what you used to call her."

"She is liyer with me."

"If I remember rightly she was a pretty good-looking girl."

"Oh, yes, as girls go. Her mother was a fine-looking woman," added the giant, in a reflective sort of way.

"If she had lived, I reckon, mebbe, that I would not have been such a rascal, but she died when Patience was a leetle gal, but seven years old, and as times didn't go well with me, I took a short cut to wealth; and, as a result, I have been a candidate for the gallows ever since."

"You'll be elected some of these days; don't you fear?" exclaimed Parson John, with a drunken leer.

When the parson got a certain quantity of liquor in him he was apt to be sarcastic, but his companions never heeded his remarks.

"She's almost a woman now, isn't she?" Captain Colorado observed.

"Yes, over eighteen."

"Is she of much use to you in your little games—good for a decoy-duck, eh?" the outlaw chief questioned.

A shade passed over the face of the gray-bearded giant, as he shook his head.

"Oh, no, nothing of the kind. I'm an overgrown ruffian, only fit for the rope, but I'm not bad enough to bring my innocent child up to a life of sin," he answered.

"She hasn't the least idea of what a scoundrel I am. I've covered my tracks so well that she has not the slightest suspicion."

"Of course, I am obliged to be away at odd times, but in order to account for my absences and any peculiar behavior, I've managed to give her the idea that I am not exactly right in the upper story, a little cracked, you know, and a man who is a little bit crazy at times is not expected to give much of an account of himself."

"That was a fine idea," Captain Colorado remarked, with an approving nod.

"But, I say, what was it this sport said about your trying to strangle him?"

"That is the little game I have been working," the gray-bearded outlaw explained.

"When a man is strangled in a scientific manner it don't leave much marks of violence, and the average man when he comes across the carcass of a man who has been strangled by a fellow who understands how to do the trick, is apt to come to the conclusion that the galoot died a natural death."

"I roped this fellow in all right, got him to drink doctored whisky, but when I sat on him, tightening the noose around his neck, there was a sharp crack like a pistol-shot, and that's all I know of the business."

"When I came to my senses I was lying on my bed and it was broad daylight."

"My gal said she had been trying to wake me for an hour, but that I acted as if I was in a swoon."

"Mighty strange affair," Captain Colorado commented.

"Yes, the only way I can account for it is that I had a sort of a stroke of palsy just as I was going to punish my man."

"Both my father and mother died that way and, mebbe, I inherited it."

"Was your daughter in the house?" asked the outlaw chief.

"Yes, asleep upstairs, but she hadn't nothing to do with it. Yes, I took pains to make sure she was asleep before I commenced operations, and then how was it possible for such a child as that to strike me—? I was without my knowledge how it was done?"

"Yes, that's true. I say, El, if your gal is a good-looking female, I don't mind counting her," Captain Colorado observed, in a humorous way.

"It is about time for me to get another wife."

"Cap'n you are worse than a Mormon!" Parson John exclaimed. "You have had about fourteen wives already."

"The more the merrier!" the outlaw replied.

"Oh, no, my gal is not for you, cap'n, meaning no offense, but nary man shall get her who ain't all right and above board."

"She is all I've got in the world and she shu'n't come to harm while I live."

"But enough of the gal; let's come down to business and see whar we had best make a break. Thar's a heap of plunder to be had if we are men enough to go for it."

The result of this debate of the outlaws the reader will see anon, and so we will not take up space by detailing their words.

CHAPTER XIX.

HUNTING A MAN.

ALEXANDER MURRAY and his new-made bride rode straight from the lone ranch in the foothills of the Mogollon Range to Crested Hill, and as they rode onward Oriana explained how it was that she came to regard the Silver Sport with such a bitter hatred, but she did not confine herself strictly to the truth.

It would have been an extremely hard task for her to have said to the man whom she had just wedded under such peculiar circumstances:

"I hate this man—this Highland Wyld—because I offered him my love and he did not care enough for me to accept it."

"If he had complied with my wishes and agreed to play the bravo's part, then I would have married him."

"But he did not care enough for me to become my champion, and so I hate him as only a woman can hate when the love she proffers is scorned."

The proud girl had too much of the treacherous, revengeful Mexican blood in her to make a frank confession of this kind, but it was necessary to tell some tale to Murray in explanation of the hatred that she bore to the Silver Sport, and so, with the cunning that seems to appertain more to those who are of the blood of two races than the descendants of one, she related a story wherein truth and falsehood was ingeniously blended.

She frankly confessed that after the death of her brother, when she had determined upon securing full measure of revenge, she had employed the Silver Sport to fight her battles, and that it was his cunning brain which suggested the scheme by means of which the signature of the owner of the Red Elephant Mine was obtained to the apparently innocent bit of paper which afterward turned out to be a note for fifty thousand dollars.

"And he was the man who worked the trick?" Murray questioned at this point in the narrative.

"Yes."

"Well, it was very cleverly done; the fellow took me unawares and had me foul before I had any idea that any one was in the neighborhood."

"I owe him one for that and I shall not be sorry if I get a chance to pay him off."

Then Oriana continued her tale, but departed from the truth at this point as she represented that it was the Silver Sport who had suggested that he would kill Murray provided she would consent to marry him, and she admitted frankly that, as she felt then, the idea of the death was not repugnant to her, but the union with the unknown sport was, and when she hesitated he threatened that, if she did not consent, he would reveal all the particulars in regard to the note.

"I defied him and bade him go do his worst!" she exclaimed, in conclusion. "And since that time I have noticed that he has been playing the spy upon me, and when he made his appearance to-night I was not astonished, for I felt sure he was keeping a constant watch upon me."

Murray believed the story and did not have the slightest suspicion that the greater part of it was false.

"And this is why I ask you to kill the wretch," she added.

"It is a task that I will undertake with pleasure," he replied, grim determination in his voice. "The scoundrel with his infernal note trick caused me to pass some anxious hours, and I shall be glad to square the account."

"I will either kill the fellow or run him out of the town."

Bold words!

And Murray believed he could do it, too.

For though he wasn't any fire-eater, yet he had been concerned in a couple of bloody encounters and each time he had managed to get the best of the fight.

Great was the astonishment in the morning when the camp of Crested Hill woke up and learned what had occurred since the town had gone to rest on the previous evening.

Of course the true history of the affair was not made public, for the tale came from the newly married couple through the landlord of the hotel.

The account given was that during the night

the beautiful Mexican girl—as Oriana was generally termed in the camp on account of her dark, Spanish style of beauty—and Alex Murray, the owner of the Red Elephant Mine, had gone off secretly to where a parson dwelt in a lone ranch in the foothills and there by him had been united in wedlock.

The Silver Sport could have told a somewhat different story, if he had so willed, but, as the reader has probably discovered by this time, Highland Wyld was a man who attended strictly to his own business and never troubled his head about any one else's.

The last man in the world to talk if by his conversation he would work harm to any living soul.

And though he knew that the girl was his enemy and would be certain to endeavor to be revenged upon him because he would not become a bravo for her sake, and that the true recital of the night's adventures would be apt to cause talk which would not be to the credit of either herself or the man whom she had married, yet he never said a word to lead any one to suppose that he knew aught of the affair.

Acting upon the impulse of the moment, Murray had promised to either kill or drive the Silver Sport from the camp of Crested Hill.

But, after a night's sleep, when he came to consider the matter in the morning, he came to the conclusion that he had entered upon an undertaking which would be apt to task all his powers.

And the more he thought about the thing, the more uncertain he became in regard to the best way to go about the matter.

In this dilemma he finally came to the conclusion that it would be wise to consult the foreman of the Red Elephant works, sagacious, long-headed Jimmy McMillen, universally regarded as being one of the wisest men in the camp.

Murray had had it in his power to favor McMillen on several occasions, and he knew that he could trust the veteran to give him good advice.

So at the noon-hour, while the hands were eating their dinner, Murray called McMillen into the office.

"Jimmy, I am in a peck of trouble," he said, "and I want your advice."

"Certainly, I shall be glad if I can be of any service to you," the foreman remarked, as he helped himself to a chair, or a box rather to state the actual fact, as there was only one chair in the office, and that was occupied by the Red Elephant owner.

"Do you know this new comer in the camp—this man who is called the Silver Sport?"

"Oh, yes; he's a daisy."

McMillen had been one of the spectators when Highland Wyld had distinguished himself by defeating the two bruisers in London Bill's saloon.

"Pretty desperate character, eh?"

"Well, I don't know as it would be quite fair to say that, for he seems to be a quiet, civil fellow enough, only when he gets on the war-path he is a hummer."

"I am afraid that there is going to be trouble between this Silver Sport and myself. I don't believe that this camp is going to be big enough to hold both of us."

The foreman looked grave at this announcement, and then he shook his head.

"The outlook doesn't appear to be promising, eh?" Murray questioned.

"To tell you the honest truth, he would be about the last man in the camp that I would want to run against."

"Well, the circumstances are such that the thing is forced on me. As I have said, Crested Hill isn't big enough for both of us, and now what I am figuring upon is the best way to go about the business."

Again the foreman shook his head.

"It is almost impossible for a man to give advice on such a subject, but if I was going to try to climb a man like the Silver Sport, I should want to start in with all the advantage possible on my side. I reckon I should have a cocked revolver in my coat-pocket, and I should be mighty careful to get the drop on him, for if he got any show at all I reckon the chances are I would be wiped out."

The advice was shrewdly given, and Murray thanked the foreman for it.

That night at nine o'clock he made his appearance in the London Arms, a loaded and cocked revolver in his pocket. He was on the war-path.

CHAPTER XX.

WAR TO THE KNIFE.

MURRAY had started out on his quest a little after eight and had made the tour of all the saloons in the town in search of the Silver Sport, but had not succeeded in finding him. Just before nine, however, happening to drop into the hotel, he heard the landlord let fall a chance observation in regard to having just left Highland Wyld at London Bill's place, so off the speculator hurried, eager to perform the task which he had undertaken.

The information so unwittingly volunteered by the Kentuckian in regard to the whereabouts of the Silver Sport was correct.

Highland Wyld had gone into the saloon for the purpose of hearing the news of the day.

In these frontier mining-camps, the saloons answer for exchanges and clubs where the citizens may meet and swap opinions in regard to current happenings.

When Murray came in, the Silver Sport was leaning on the bar, at the end nearest the door, conversing with the proprietor of the place, London Bill, in person.

The host of the London Arms was in a "horrible mess," as he expressed it.

Both of his boxers had made the acquaintance of an "angel" that afternoon—in professional argot an angel is a man who is flush with money and is willing to expend it in the most liberal manner—and the result of their making the rounds of the town in the company of the "angel" was that neither one of the two was in a condition to spar for the amusement of the saloon patrons that evening.

As London Bill remarked:

"Both on 'em are good men, but hif they were ten times has good they couldn't stand ag'in' the blarsted rum, you know."

And when Highland Wyld sauntered into the saloon a brilliant idea occurred to the Englishman.

He could engage the Silver Sport to take the place of the absent boxers, and no doubt some of the crowd would be willing to spar with him.

So he tried to make a bargain with Highland Wyld, but to his surprise the Silver Sport laughed at the idea.

"Oh, no, none of it in mine, thank you," he said, smilingly.

"When I came into the town dead broke and was strapped for a meal and a bed, then I was glad to rake in the purses you hung up with such a liberal hand, but that is all over now."

"I am well-fixed financially, and I have no notion of displaying my talents in the boxing line for the edification of your patrons."

Then London Bill suggested that ten dollars might be an inducement, but the Silver Sport immediately replied that if he said a hundred it wouldn't be any temptation.

This of course closed the discussion, for the jolly Englishman immediately remarked that he reckoned the Silver Sport had got all the big purses out of him that he was ever likely to get.

At this point Alexander Murray had entered, and, perceiving Highland Wyld, walked up to the bar and took up a position about six feet from him.

The speculator had his hand in his pocket grasping his revolver.

The advice that the old foreman had given him he deemed to be good, and he was going to follow it to the letter.

His idea was to provoke the Silver Sport into a quarrel, then get "the drop" on him and shoot him before he could get his weapon in readiness for action.

According to the code which prevails in the Wild West and regulates matters of this kind, if two gentlemen engage in a dispute and proceed to settle it by a resort to weapons, the best man is he who can succeed in getting his tool out first, and no blame can be attached to the victor if in the "dispute" he manages to either kill or disable his antagonist before the other can get a chance to do mortal harm to his foe.

The conqueror was a lucky man to be so quick on "the draw," and his opponent was unfortunate in getting into a difficulty with a smarter man than himself.

This was the game that Alex. Murray intended to play.

So, when he approached the counter and London Bill came up to wait on him, he remarked:

"I don't care to take anything, bartender, while that rascal is hanging around."

And he nodded his head toward Highland Wyld as he spoke.

London Bill stared in amazement, and the men in the neighborhood who were near enough to overhear the words did likewise.

But the Silver Sport did not manifest the least concern.

All he did was to survey the proprietor of the Red Elephant mine from head to foot with his clear, calm eyes, but he did not stir from his position, lounging as he was against the bar with his left arm resting on it.

The Silver Sport was no novice in an affair of this kind.

It was not the first time he had faced an angry man, bent upon a hostile meeting, and he noticed that Murray had his right hand in the pocket of the loose blue flannel sack-coat which he wore, and he understood why the hand was there, too.

"Stranger, did you mean me when you said you didn't care to drink while a certain rascal was hanging around?" Highland Wyld inquired.

"Yes, I did; you are an infernal scoundrel!" retorted Murray, quickly.

And he made a motion as if to draw his hand from his pocket, but hesitated when he saw that the other did not move.

He had calculated that when he hurled this insult at the Silver Sport the other would surely go for his revolver and so give him a chance to assail him.

The Silver Sport laughed outright, while about every eye in the room was fastened intently upon the two men, for general attention had been attracted by the altercation.

And all were amazed at the behavior of Highland Wyld.

The citizens of Crested Hill had seen enough of the stranger with the silver locks, since his advent in their camp to understand that he was a "brave of the first water."

"A galoot with lots of sand in his crawl!" as one of the outspoken miners had declared.

And that such a man should not only submit to be called a rascal and a scoundrel, but laugh outright in the face of the man who had insulted him, as if he considered it a good joke, was really astounding.

The Silver Sport was no coward—there wasn't the least doubt in regard to that matter.

Any man who dared to stand up against the two boxers in the manner that he had done would not be apt to show the white feather.

But why, after being called vile names, he should choose to laugh, instead of resenting the insult was a mystery.

"That is a pretty rough name to hurl in a man's teeth," the Silver Sport remarked, after he had "grinned" in the face of the other for a moment.

"I have known men to be shot for less than that."

"Why don't you try it on?" sneered Murray, keeping a firm grip on his cocked revolver, but hesitating to draw it until Highland Wyld made a motion toward the nickel-plated revolvers, the butts of which were peeping out of holsters, attached to the belt which girded in his sinewy waist.

By the unwritten law of the Wild West, which governs such encounters as this, the moment that the Silver Sport attempted to draw a weapon, Murray was at liberty to get his "gun" out as soon as possible, and the quickest fellow on the draw was the best man.

It was a fair fight, and the best man would win.

But if Murray drew and fired at the other without the Silver Sport manifesting any idea of getting out a weapon, then it was "murder," and Judge Lynch, with his Vigilantes, would be pretty certain to be called upon to bring the criminal to speedy justice.

Again Highland Wyld laughed as the words of the other reached him.

"Ha, ha, ha! I reckon you think that you are about as smart as they make 'em!" he exclaimed.

"If I mistake not you are the Red Elephant boss—you are the man who downed the Mexican, Fronteras, and having succeeded so well in that skirmish, you are anxious to go on the war-path again—just hungry for more blood."

"I reckon that there isn't much chance of getting any fight out of you, though, for you don't seem to have courage enough to resent an insult!" Murray retorted as insolently as possible.

"Ah, but, my dear Red Elephant boss, you are not giving me a fair show in this deal."

"You ask me to go into a game when you have the cards 'stocked' and the aces up your sleeve. That will not do, you know, at all. I understand your game."

"Your right hand in your pocket there grasps a revolver, cocked and ready for action. You want to provoke me to reach for a weapon and then you will pull and shoot me before I can get my tool out."

"But I know a trick worth two of that!"

CHAPTER XXI.

A SURPRISE.

AND as the Silver Sport looked on, he went through a mental review which sustained all the wisdom of the old man, and he was not that the boss of the Red Elephant property, as Highland Wyld had jocosely termed Alexander Murray.

During the discussion he had not altered his position in the least, but still lounged upon the counter, his left arm resting on the bar, but while he was speaking his right hand wandered in the most careless way possible to his throat and the fingers played with the necktie which was knotted in sailor-fashion, with the ends hanging down on his chest.

Then, as the last words of the speech escaped from his lips, his right hand made a sudden dive into the opening of his shirt, which extended clear to his waist, and before Murray could make a motion to draw his weapon, the Silver Sport had him covered with a derringer pistol which he had drawn with a rapidity which was truly wonderful.

There were many old and experienced Western men in the room, veterans of the war, who had assisted at some little surprise-parties of this kind before, but not a man of them all had

ever seen the trick done in so marvelous a manner before.

Murray had perceived the motion, anticipated that the hand was in search of a weapon and had hastened to draw his revolver.

But the Silver Sport had him covered before he got the weapon half-way out.

"None of that—none of that!" Highland Wyld cried, sternly.

"Don't attempt to draw that revolver, for if you do, before you get it clear of your pocket I will bore a hole through you with the ounce ball that this derringer carries which will be apt to settle your account with this world!"

"Don't make any mistake about the thing. I have got the drop on you and all the advantage is on my side!"

"This is no popgun, carrying a ball the size of a pill, but a tool with an ounce ball, big enough to stop a mad bull, and no man who ever got plugged with one of them in the right place was ever of any use afterward!"

Murray was pale with rage and fairly trembled with excitement.

He was in a trap from whence he saw no means of escape.

According to the rules which govern affairs of this kind, his life was at the mercy of the Silver Sport.

He had been the aggressor.

He had insulted Highland Wyld and it was apparent that he had entered the saloon with the idea of getting into a difficulty with him, and now that the other had succeeded in turning the tables he had no right to complain.

He could not plead that he had no intention of quarreling, for the way in which he had acted and the cocked revolver in his pocket, all ready for action, completely disproved any such statement.

After a moment's pause the Silver Sport continued his speech, while Alexander Murray glared at him as though he wished that his eyes possessed the power once ascribed to the orbs of the ancient basilisk, and he could strike his opponent dead.

"You called me a rascal and scoundrel a moment ago, and I didn't resent the foul names, for I understood that you wished to provoke me into a quarrel so you could get a chance to shoot me down before I would be able to get out a weapon."

"I laughed at you, for it was my game to throw you off your guard until I got a chance to get the drop on you."

"Now I hurl back the words rascal and scoundrel in your teeth with scorn, and if I was all that you say, still I would be a gentleman compared to you, you mean, miserable assassin—you coward! who did not dare to challenge me to meet you in a fair and open contest where the advantages would be even, but, like a snake, endeavored to take me at such a disadvantage that I wouldn't have any chance for my life, you miserable wretch!"

Murray's breath came thick and hard, but he was in the toils and he dared not provoke the Silver Sport to the execution of his threat by attempting to draw his revolver.

There was but one course open to him, and this he immediately adopted.

"I am no coward!" he cried. "Nor am I an assassin."

"I am not afraid to meet you in a fair fight, and though I admit that I came after you to-night with the idea of calling you to an account, yet I deny that I intended not to give you any chance for your life, and the last proof of the truth of that statement is that in this affair you have succeeded in getting the best of it."

"Now, I dare you to give me a fair show for my money!"

"I dare you to meet me outside on the street, revolver in hand, and settle this business for good and all!"

"Well, I am one of that kind of men who likes like thunder to take care, and although, as you say, I have the best of the show to-night, I am not willing to give you another dollar for your cash, for you have made your bet, the money is out and the luck is against you, yet, just for greens, I will go you!"

"Shove your revolver back in your pocket though, for I think you are a pison snake, and I don't intend you shall play any more on me."

"All I ask is a fair show," Murray responded, sulkily, as he thrust his revolver back in his pocket and took his hand from its butt.

"You are going to have it—you can bet your bottom dollar on it!"

"You are going to have the fairest show to be shot that any man ever enjoyed in this world, and don't you forget it!"

"Better keep your boasts until the fight is over," the speculator rejoined.

He felt sore over his discomfiture, and the lively sallies of the Silver Sport annoyed him.

"Tis all over now, except the shooting!" Highland Wyld exclaimed, in the most confident manner in the world.

"You are as good as salivated now, and I give you timely warning that you had better make

arrangements in regard to how you want to be planted before you go into this picnic, for you will not be in any condition to attend to it afterward."

A broad grin appeared on the faces of the bystanders at this "fooling," for it appealed directly to their sense of humor.

"Enough of this nonsense!" cried the speculator, impatiently.

"Let us get to work; I have no doubt, though, that if you can fight as well as you can talk there isn't much chance for me."

"A little nonsense now and then is relished by the wisest men," Highland Wylde quoted.

"But I will not keep you waiting, for I am as anxious for the fray as you are."

"What are the conditions of the fight?" Murray demanded.

"The simpler they are, the better in my opinion," replied the sport.

"There's a good moon so we will have plenty of light."

"Go out into the street, take up any position you like within a hundred yards of the door, then the moment I make my appearance in the middle of the road you are at liberty to go for me, and I for you, and we'll fight until one of us gets sick of the fun."

This was a fair enough arrangement for both parties, and the Red Elephant owner immediately expressed himself satisfied with it.

And the bystanders too all nodded their heads in approbation.

Then Alexander Murray went forth from the saloon, and he was followed by almost every one in the place eager to witness the encounter.

Through one of the windows the Silver Sport watched until he saw his adversary take up his position, and he took advantage of this wait to examine his revolvers, clicking the cylinders around, so as to be sure that they were all in perfect working order.

As he observed to London Bill, who stood by his side, watching the operation with a great deal of interest:

"It would be an ugly thing for a man to lose his life, simply because a bit of dirt had got in the lock of his tool and checked its working at the time when it was needed most."

"You kin bet yer blooming heyes on that!" the Englishman responded.

"But I say, Wylde, me boy, are you going for to lay this blooming duffer hout?"

"Well, I don't know about that—that depends, you see, on how good a man he is, but you can bet all you are worth, Bill, that I don't intend to let him lay me out if I can help it."

"Wot's the bleeding row between you, anyway?"

"Like all mischief in this world there is a woman at the bottom of it," the Sport replied.

"This fellow and I, personally, have no quarrel, but a woman has started the difficulty and, I suppose, like the generality of such cases, it will cost one of us our life."

"He's in position!" exclaimed London Bill.

"I'll go for him then."

"Plug him! he's no good; never spent a dollar in my place in his life."

The Silver Sport laughed at this peculiar reasoning, as he advanced to the door.

London Bill followed close behind.

"I dunno 'bout this chap," the Englishman observed, "he may be an awful cuss on the fight, but I will bet two to one that you get away with him if I find hany of the boys with sand enough to back the Red Elephant."

"I'll try my best to win the money for you," our hero rejoined as he stepped out into the street.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE FIGHT.

As the Silver Sport had remarked, the moon was high in the heavens, and all objects were almost as plainly visible as by day.

A better night for such a contest a man couldn't wish.

Murray stood in the center of the street, a good three hundred yards away from the London Arms, his figure standing out full in the moonlight.

All the rest were skulking in the shadows of the houses, thus plainly betraying by the care they were taking, that they did not have implicit confidence in the marksmanship of the duelists, but were anxious to shield their precious persons from stray bullets.

The fighters seemed equally matched as far as weapons were concerned, both being armed with a pair of revolvers.

But in reality the Silver Sport had a decided advantage.

His revolvers were far superior in every way to the weapons carried by Murray.

They were heavier tools and as good as the best artisans could construct, for to a man who led an adventurous life like Highland Wylde it was of the utmost importance that his offensive weapons should be the best that money could buy, for upon the goodness of his tools his life might often hang.

Then they were self-cockers, too, and this in such a duel was a decided advantage.

The Silver Sport took up a position in the center of the street right in a line with his foe.

"Now, then, Red Elephant boss, I am ready for you!" he exclaimed.

And with the word he commenced to advance upon his foe.

Murray also started forward.

This was the first fight of this kind in which the speculator had ever been engaged.

All his previous hostile meetings had been impromptu ones, fought on the spur of the moment.

Murray was a good revolver-shot, though he could not be rated as a master-hand with the weapon, and he was haunted by the belief that his opponent was.

It was not the first time that he had encountered sharps of the tribe to which the Silver Sport evidently belonged; men who held their lives as lightly as though, cat-like, they had nine at their disposal.

And such men too were generally extremely skillful in the use of all sorts of weapons. They were obliged to be, or else they could not possibly have played the daring rôles which they often assumed.

If he could have arranged matters to suit himself never of his own free will would he have faced Highland Wylde in a fair and open fight where the chances were even, and neither man could boast of any advantage over the other.

But, having essayed to trap the Silver Sport, and been caught in the snare himself, there wasn't any way to escape the consequences of his rashness except to demand a duel on equal terms.

And now that he was face to face with his foe, believing that in marksmanship he was not the equal of the other, he resolved not to give the Silver Sharp any chance to aim in cool deliberation at him, but to disconcert him by an abrupt charge.

So, the moment that Highland Wylde announced that he was ready, the speculator advanced rapidly upon him, breaking into a regular run and firing a couple of shots from each revolver as he came on.

This was done more with the idea of upsetting the nerves of his antagonist than from any hope of being able to do him any harm.

The shots of course went wide of the mark, so wide that a couple of them came within a foot or so of the spectators clustered by the houses, and the result of this was an immediate scamper of the bystanders, eager to get out of range.

The Silver Sport could not help laughing when he beheld the miners fall over each other in their hurry to escape from the dangerous neighborhood.

"Stand here with me if you don't want to get hit!" he cried.

Two more bullets came hurtling through the air from Murray's revolvers.

This time he was so near the Silver Sport that the leaden messengers came in dangerous proximity to Highland Wylde's person.

"As the aged dorky said when the bricks commenced to tumble from the chimney-top on his head, 'if this foolishness doesn't quit some one will get hurt,'" the Silver Sport muttered.

And then he gave a loud cry and tumbled upon the ground, falling upon his hands and knees.

"He's hit—he's hit—he's down!" the anxious spectator exclaimed.

And a long-drawn breath escaped from the speculator's lips as he beheld his foe fall, and almost involuntarily he came to a halt.

This was exactly what the Silver Sport wanted.

He did not seek Murray's death, and so he hated to fire at him as he came rushing onward for fear that the shot might inflict a deadly wound, as however careful might be his aim, the advance of the other would be apt to interfere with it.

It would not do to miss him altogether.

He must aim to wound, and under the circumstances he would be as likely to kill as to disable.

But when Murray came to a dead halt the Silver Sport was quick to improve the advantage.

He straightened up on his knees, out went his right hand, and then, just as a cry of rage escaped from Murray's lips, who realized, too late, that he had been tricked, there came the little flash of flame, the puff of white smoke, and the sharp report which told that the leaden messenger had been sent on its journey.

Murray was only about twenty yards away, and at such a distance it was almost impossible for so expert a revolver-shot as the Silver Sport to miss his man.

And Highland Wylde did not miss on this occasion.

Hardly had the report of the discharge rung out on the air when Murray threw up his hands, staggered forward, and then fell.

There was no mistaking the fact that the speculator was hit, and hard hit, too.

The Silver Sport rose to his feet, and the spectators, with their eyes full of wonder, glared upon the scene.

A moment's pause, and then Murray attempted to rise to his feet.

He got upon his knees, tried to raise the revolver which he clutched in his left hand—he had evidently been wounded either in the right shoulder or right arm, for he did not attempt to use it, the member hanging helpless at his side.

He raised the pistol to a level, attempting to draw a "bead" on his antagonist—the Silver Sport meanwhile remaining as motionless as a graven image—but the effort was too much for him, for before he could discharge the weapon, with a groan of pain he fell over sideways, evidently having gone into a faint.

The fight was ended, and the spectators rushed from their sheltered nooks out into the street.

Some gathered around the fallen man, others hastened to congratulate the victor.

"You 'ave settled 'is 'ash for 'im, as I thought you would, blast my blooming heyes!" exclaimed London Bill to the Silver Sport, making in his excitement worse havoc than usual with the "haiches."

"Do you s'pose he's dead?" quoth one of the miners.

"I reckon not," Highland Wylde answered.

"Anyhow, it wasn't my game to kill him. I bear the man no malice."

"Of course when he attempted to walk over me it was only natural that I should resent the offense."

"What is the matter anyway—why did he want to quarrel with you?" one of the bystanders queried, being of an inquisitive mind.

"You are too much for me, stranger, and I reckon you had better ask the Red Elephant man," the Silver Sport replied.

All the listeners took this answer to mean that Highland Wylde didn't know why the speculator had assailed him, which was exactly the impression which the Silver Sport intended to convey.

He had guessed though why the attack had been made.

It was the malice of the revengeful half-Mexican girl which had urged Alexander Murray on.

She had tried all means in her power to induce him to kill the speculator, when he was acting as her ally, and now that by the workings of one of those peculiar caprices which are common to a certain type of women she had become Alexander Murray's wife, the hatred which she once bore the speculator had been transferred to him.

Murray was badly wounded in the shoulder, and so on an extemporized litter he was carried to his home.

Neither he nor his wife now lived at the hotel, but occupied a cabin on the mining property.

After the fight was ended the citizens returned to their usual amusements again just as if nothing had happened, for such little affairs as this are too common in the mining region to excite any more attention than a fisticuff battle in a more civilized community.

Highland Wylde joined a poker party, playing more for amusement than for money, for the "limit" was a small one—and stayed in the saloon until close to midnight, when the "coterie" broke up and the members sought their abiding-places.

As it happened, none of them went toward the hotel so the Silver Sport walked on alone.

He was in no hurry, but sauntered on with his hands in his pockets, and when within a hundred yards of the Old Kentucky Home, a dark form came suddenly from behind the corner of a house and leveled a revolver at his breast.

CHAPTER XXIII.

CATCHING A TARTAR.

THE surprise was cunningly planned and any ordinary man would have been taken at a great disadvantage.

But Highland Wylde, the Silver Sport, was no ordinary man, as the reader has probably discovered long ere this.

He had no reason to anticipate that any danger would threaten him during this brief walk through the heart of the mining-town, from the London Arms to the Old Kentucky Home, but, for all that, despite the fact that he appeared to be totally unprepared for any attack, yet he was fully ready to meet it.

As we have stated, he was strolling along with his hands in the side-pockets of the loose sack-coat which he wore, humming a popular air, as if at peace with himself and all the world, but in each of his pockets was a cocked derringer pistol and his grip was on them.

So the moment the stranger jumped out before him, up came the right hand of the Silver Sport, still in the pocket, and he had the other "covered" as completely as he was himself by the revolver in the hands of the stranger, although owing to the fact that the pistol was concealed in the coat its aim was not apparent.

The assailant who had so suddenly made his appearance, and who had evidently been lying in wait for a victim, was a slender fellow below the medium height, and the face which looked out from under the brim of the slouch hat,

pulled down low over the brows, was that of a son of some torrid clime where the sun's kiss is warm and strong.

For a moment, as the Silver Sport gazed upon the person of the new-comer, when he sprang into view, Highland Wylde was startled.

The reason is easily explained.

The footpad was the image of the Mexican, Michael Fronteras, whom the Silver Sport had seen shot to death when the sheriff and his posse had made the attack on the Red Elephant mine.

Not only that, but he seemed to be dressed in the very suit of clothes which the Mexican had worn when he had defied the sheriff to the fight which had brought death to him.

Naturally such a thing as this was enough to startle for a moment even a man who boasted nerves of steel, such as the Silver Sport possessed.

The shock lasted but for a moment though, for a second glance revealed to him that the person who bore such a great likeness to the dead Mexican was his sister Oriana, now the wife of the Red Elephant speculator.

Highland Wylde grasped the situation immediately.

The woman had determined upon taking vengeance herself upon the man she hated, and in order to successfully carry out her design she had disguised herself in her brother's clothes.

The Mexican was a man of small stature, and so his garb fitted the woman as though it had been made for her.

The surprise was complete apparently, and her voice was full of triumph as she cried:

"At last I hold your life at my mercy!"

"Hello, hello! what are you about?" the Silver Sport exclaimed, looking the woman straight in the eye, and apparently not in the least alarmed at his perilous position.

"Don't you recognize me—don't you understand that you are completely in my power?"

"Oh, yes; I think I know you: I have a sort of a dim recollection that I have seen you somewhere before."

"I am Oriana Marshal, the woman whose love you scorned!"

"Yes, yes; Mrs. Alexander Murray now."

"The same, and all the hatred I once felt toward him I have now transferred to you!" the woman cried, angrily.

"What on earth did you want to do that for?" queried the Silver Sport, as if he was completely puzzled by the affair.

"Do you think that such a woman as I am can tamely submit to be scorned by any man?" she demanded, hotly.

"But you have got the whole thing wrong; I only refused to become a bravo—refused to kill a man who had never injured me; and to my notion I was doing about the square thing when I decided to take that course."

"It will cost you your life, though!" Oriana hissed, between her firm-set teeth.

"Do not be in a hurry; let us understand this matter. I haven't quite got the hang of it, I think," the Silver Sport observed, perfectly cool and collected.

"I suppose it is to you then I am indebted for the trouble I had to-night with your husband?" he continued.

"Yes, that is true."

"You set him on to attack me."

"Yes, I did."

"Well, I had an idea that you were at the bottom of it, for unless you prompted him to make the assault I could see no reason for his acting in that way."

"I told him that if he loved me he must kill you!"

And the woman's face fully expressed the hatred that burned within her.

"Well, really now, you were after me with a sharp stick, as the saying is, but the performance didn't come off exactly as you anticipated," the Silver Sport remarked, while a quiet smile played around the corners of his mouth.

"Instead of killing me he got laid out himself."

"Satan himself seems to protect you!" the woman cried, angrily.

"That supposition on your part is in the idea, I suppose, that the devil always looks after his own."

And Highland Wylde laughed at the idea, much to the astonishment of Oriana, who was amazed to account for his coolness, for she believed she had him helpless in her power and that nothing could save him from her revolver bullet.

Acting on the feline instincts of her nature she was playing with him now as the cat plays with its prey before it destroys it.

"Well, I don't know whether I am a favorite son of his Satanic Majesty or not, but there is no denying the fact that in the course of my extremely checkered career I have had some really miraculous escapes."

"You will, not escape from me this time, though!" she cried, with fiery determination.

"When my husband was brought home helpless and I learned the particulars of the fight, I made up my mind that I would act as my own messenger of vengeance."

"You were skillful enough to conquer Alexander Murray, and I set my wits to work to devise a trap from which you could not escape, no matter how great your skill with all kinds of weapons, nor how acute your wits."

"I was resolved not to give you a chance for your life, and so I dressed myself in my brother's clothes and lay in wait for you."

"Quite a surprise party," the Silver Sport remarked, jocosely, much to the wonder of the woman, who could not understand how it was that her victim took the matter so good-naturedly.

Her idea had been that when Highland Wylde discovered he was helpless in her power he would beg for mercy.

And she had gloated over the thought that the daring spirit of the adventurer would be humbled even to the dust.

She was annoyed at the cool and easy way in which the Silver Sport took the matter, and determined to bring the scene to a speedy end.

"Come, you have but a few more moments of life left; if you have prayers to say, be speedy, for in a few fleeting seconds I shall pull the trigger and discharge the ball which will give you your passport to another world."

"Oh, no, you are wrong there, you will not do anything of the kind—that is, you will not if you are wise."

It was now Oriana's turn to look surprised, for the air of perfect confidence with which the Silver Sport spoke amazed her.

What did it mean?

"Don't be in a hurry, you know; be sure you are right and then go ahead! That was Davy Crockett's motto, and a rare good one it is too," Highland Wylde continued.

"This little affair is not so one-sided as it appears."

"Take time to examine the matter and you will see that I am correct in that statement."

"You are trying to gain time so as to devise some way to escape from the certain death which threatens you, but the plan will not work!"

"You don't understand the situation, and are getting all mixed up. You do not threaten me any more than I threaten you."

"Impossible!"

"It is a fact, as sure as you are born! Don't you notice that my right hand is outstretched in the pocket of the coat—can't you guess that that hand clutches a cocked and loaded pistol—a derringer, too, carrying a ball as big as the end of your thumb—and that it will be as easy for me to fire my weapon as you to discharge your revolver, the cloth through which the ball must pass offering no obstruction? And then there is the certainty too that my heavy derringer bullet, about twice the size of your revolver ball, will be apt to do much more damage."

"Your bullet may not lay me out, but mine will be almost certain to cut a hole big enough to let your life ebb away."

For a moment the woman was dumfounded.

She could hardly believe that it was possible, but when she looked at the outstretched hand concealed in the coat-pocket, she fancied that she could detect the outlines of a small pistol.

But in her disgust she cried:

"It is not the truth! It is only a trick to escape from the certain death that awaits you at my hands!"

"The riddle is very easily solved if you think that way," the Silver Sport observed, with perfect coolness.

"Just pull the trigger of your revolver, and before the bullet speeds on its mission of destruction mine will also be on its way."

But the woman did not dare to accept the challenge.

There was a weakness in the Mexican blood which partly filled her veins, and in such a moment as this her courage failed her.

She did not dare to make the test.

Highland Wylde saw that he had gained an advantage and was quick to improve it.

"You don't believe I have a pistol in my pocket and that as far as weapons go we are on equal terms?"

"No, I do not!" she replied, doggedly, although in reality she did believe it.

"Why, I not only have a pistol in the right-hand pocket, but one in the left also."

And then, quick as a flash, the left hand came out of the pocket grasping a derringer, with the hammer up, which the Silver Sport immediately leveled at the breast of the disguised woman.

"Now I have an advantage, two pistols to your one, so I reckon I will not cash in my checks this time, or if I am fated to travel the dark road which leads down to the gates of death, you must bear me company."

The woman recoiled in dismay.

The stronger spirit had overpowered the weaker. She was not yet ready to die.

And then a bright thought flashed into her mind.

"If you should succeed in killing me and yet manage to escape with your life, the hangman's rope would seal your doom, for these wild, rough men who dwell in this camp would never forgive you for having killed a woman."

Again Highland Wylde laughed, for again he knew he had the best of the struggle.

"You are reckoning without the host, I think," he said.

"You seem to forget that you have disguised yourself in your brother's clothes, so that you look like a man."

"Will it not be easy for me to declare that when you attacked me I thought it was some fellow who wanted to 'hold me up,' and that not until I had slain you did I discover who it was?"

"You have escaped me this time, but the day will come when my vengeance will be satisfied!" Oriana cried, in baffled rage, as she put down the hammer of the revolver and thrust it in the holster of her belt.

"I hate to quarrel with a woman, but if you attack me I will kill you with as little mercy as though you were the biggest brute of a man that ever trod the earth!"

And so they parted, and Oriana was satisfied the Silver Sport meant every word he said.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THIRSTING FOR VENGEANCE.

ORIANA went straight to her home on the Red Elephant property, the pangs of baffled rage tearing at her heart.

"Is this man a demon?" she cried, as she took her way up the lonely trail by the river.

"Is it not possible to kill him?—does he bear a charmed life which is proof against mortal power?"

Of course this idea was ridiculous, and the girl was no believer in any supernatural marvels.

Still, when she reflected upon the circumstances, there was no gainsaying that some men in this life seemed to be wonderfully lucky.

Dangers which prove fatal to other men they escape without trouble.

It was luck, of course, nothing more.

And then the woman, thirsting for vengeance, asked the question:

"Is it possible that this man's luck is so great that he cannot be injured by a determined foe?"

"One swallow does not make a summer, nor two for that matter, and because two attempts to injure this daring adventurer have failed, it does not follow that a third one may not be successful."

This reasoning appeared to be good and the woman was somewhat comforted by it on her lonely homeward road.

She had engaged in this adventure without the knowledge of her husband, the idea having occurred to her after Murray had been brought home, and she had attended to making him comfortable.

A doctor had been immediately summoned—there was but one in the camp, a young fellow who had come out West to "grow up with the country," but he was a man of ability although of but limited experience.

The wound was a bad one, likely to prove troublesome for some time, but not dangerous.

He succeeded in finding and extracting the ball, then had administered an opiate with the idea of putting the patient asleep, and so allow nature to "get in her work," as he expressed it.

Oriana had taken advantage of Murray's slumber to robe herself in her brother's clothes and depart on her mission of vengeance.

The mission which had so signally failed.

Murray was still asleep when the woman reached the Red Elephant Mine, so she was able to resume her female garb without any one being aware that she had cast it aside.

She retired to rest but found it impossible to sleep, for she could not tranquilize her mind.

Turning upon the bed, she turned from side to side, and whenever she fell into a slight doze the stirring particulars of her interview with the Silver Sport came back to her mind, mixed up with all sorts of strange imaginings, so that she speedily awoke.

"Oh, I must find some way to be avenged upon this man or I shall go mad!" she cried at last, as after the weary hours passed away she saw the gray light of the dawn come in at the window.

At last, though, she managed to obtain a couple of hours' sleep, but when she awoke her thirst for vengeance was fully as great as when she had returned from her unsuccessful quest.

At first she had resolved not to acquaint her husband with the particulars of her attempt to take vengeance upon Highland Wylde, but after breakfast was over, she concluded it was best he should know of it.

Murray listened attentively to her tale, and when it was ended shook his head gravely.

"This fellow has the luck of a demon," he remarked, "but it is all luck, of course, and liable to turn at any time."

"The pitcher which goes often to the well must be broken at last, you know."

"It is an old saying, and from my own experience I am sure it is a very true one," Oriana remarked.

"Yes, I failed and you failed, and yet on both occasions it seemed as if we would be sure to succeed. It was only the infernal luck which attends this fellow that baffled us."

The girl remained silent for a moment; a plan had occurred to her, out of which she thought something might be made.

"It will not do to give the matter up now," she observed at last.

"Well, I don't know about that," Murray replied, slowly.

"Of course I would like a chance to get even with the fellow, not only on your account, but on my own, for the doctor says that it is likely that the scoundrel has marked me for life."

"The probabilities are that I will never fully recover the use of my arm, and that as long as I live it will give me cause to remember this cursed Silver Sport."

"But then when a man has got enough isn't it as well to stop?"

"I have just got off with my life this time, and if I try it on again I may not be so lucky."

"But there are more ways than one to reach a certain goal," she said.

"Very true."

"And if you and I have failed in harming this adventurer, some one else—some tool whom we may be able to employ—will be more lucky."

"That is not a bad idea—such a scheme might be made to work."

"Those men who assisted you the other night—"

"The very fellows!" Murray exclaimed, decidedly. "Better men to employ in a job of this kind could not be found anywhere in the West."

"I know the gang of old; Captain Bill Colorado—that is the fellow who arranged all the details of your abduction and then carried the thing through—is as cool and clear-headed a man as I ever saw, and then too he possesses indomitable courage, and when he goes into anything he generally makes a success of it."

"The others are good men in their way, but Bill Colorado is both the brains and the arm of the gang."

"I don't suppose there would be any trouble about enlisting their services?"

"Oh, no, none at all, provided they were liberally paid."

"I have a scheme in my head which I think will work," Oriana remarked after a few minutes' pause, during which she had been busy in thought.

"I suppose you calculate to engage the services of this gang, and then have them waylay the Silver Sport and kill him."

"No, I have a better plan than that and one which I think will be more likely to succeed."

"What is it?"

"I have about come to the conclusion that it will be a difficult matter to get the best of this adventurer by any actual force."

"He seems to have a genius for fighting, and after what I have seen of him I believe that single-handed he would be more than a match for any three men, even if they were desperadoes after the pattern of this Captain Colorado."

"Yes, but the others are not equal to the captain in any way."

"Gray Ed is a big, muscular brute with plenty of strength, but no particular ability to use it, and the parson don't amount to much as a warrior. If it came to a fight Bill Colorado would have to bear the brunt of the battle."

"And if I remember right this Gray Ed has already met the Silver Sport and come out the loser in the contest."

"So I gathered from what was said the other night, but I do not know any of the particulars."

"What does this Silver Sport do—how does he gain his living?" Oriana asked, abruptly.

"He claims to be a speculator, and is looking around for a good investment in mining property."

"In reality he is a card-sharp, I presume, and from cards gains a livelihood."

"Suppose there should be a series of robberies in this neighborhood, something like the one when he forced you to sign the paper which afterward appeared as a note, would not all such men as he fall under suspicion?"

"Most decidedly; particularly if you came forward and testified that at your instigation he had committed such a crime."

"Possibly you could swear that he suggested such a thing," Murray added, with a meaning glance.

"Certainly, and it happens to be the truth, too, for I should never have thought of such a scheme if he had not suggested it."

"That would be strong evidence."

"My plan is a simple one. Engage this band to do some road-agent work in the neighborhood of Crested Hill, and have it so arranged that the suspicion of the guilt falls directly upon him."

"Then the Vigilantes will rise and Judge Lyn execute my vengeance on the man whom I hate!"

The scheme seemed a feasible one; the two

discussed it in all its bearings, and an hour later Oriana was on her way to the outlaws' retreat in the wild foothills.

CHAPTER XXV.

HATCHING THE PLOT.

ORIANA was well mounted and it did not take her long to gallop the distance which separated the camp of Crested Hill from the lonely ranch of Gray Ed, up in the foothills of the Mogollon Range.

The girl had a wonderful memory for localities, and so she did not have the least trouble in finding her way again to the cabin where she had such a strange adventure.

She found it readily enough, and, dismounting, fastened her horse to a neighboring tree, then knocked at the door.

It was opened by the girl, Patience, whom the reader will probably remember as having come to the rescue of the Silver Sport so opportunely in a previous chapter.

The proud beauty was amazed and gazed with envious eyes upon the fresh young face of the beautiful blonde.

She noted her superb hair, her wonderful eyes, and the clear white and red of her complexion, and envy tugged at her heart-strings.

The truth had suddenly flashed upon her.

She understood now how it was that the Silver Sport had chanced to be in the neighborhood of this lonely ranch on the night when she had been abducted from the camp of Crested Hill.

When he had made his appearance on that occasion, so abruptly and entirely unexpected, her heart had given a great bound for joy, for she came instantly to the conclusion that, although he appeared to be indifferent to her charms and was not willing to agree to execute her task of vengeance even if he was rewarded with her love, yet he was keeping a secret watch upon her, and so had been able to follow her when she had been carried away.

His prompt denial, though, of the fact put her all at sea in regard to how he had happened to be in the neighborhood of the lonely ranch.

But now that she looked upon the face of the beautiful blonde she guessed what the attraction had been, and her proud lip curled in contempt.

The Silver Sport had the bad taste to prefer this doll-faced beauty to her.

The blonde's golden hair and blue eyes had captivated where her regal charms had failed.

Rage filled her heart, and she felt the anger of a demon tearing at her vitals.

Patience had thrown the door of the cabin wide open when she had responded to the knock, and Oriana could see that there wasn't any one else in the house.

And the miraculous escape, too, which the Silver Sport had spoken of when he had fallen into the power of the gray-bearded giant, who had a fancy for playing the part of a Hindoo strangler in these Arizonian wilds.

Oriana understood it all.

There wasn't any miracle about it; in some way the girl had been able to come to his assistance and had enabled him to effect his escape.

Her love had been refused because the Silver Sport preferred this red-and-white girl.

The proud half-breed beauty was furious, and it was with great difficulty that she refrained from flaming forth in open anger.

By an effort, though, she managed to restrain her feelings, but thinking to catch the girl off her guard and surprise a confession from her, she said:

"I seek Mr. Highland Wyld, and was told I would find him here."

Patience shook her head.

"No one lives here by that name."

Oriana imagined that she detected the attempted evasion, and was quick to resent it.

"I did not say that he *lived* here. I said I was told I would *find* him here!" she exclaimed, haughtily.

The color rose in Patience's face at the haughty tone, and then, too, with the quick instinct which is so strong in the majority of woman-kind, she guessed that the stranger was no friend.

"He is not here."

"When will he be?"

"I do not know," Patience replied, somewhat astonished at the persistent questioning.

"You know the gentleman?"

Patience shook her head.

Oriana glared at her for a moment.

The prompt denial infuriated her.

"Girl, why do you deny the truth?" she exclaimed; "of what avail will it be to you?"

"I do not deny the truth. I do not know any one by that name as far as I remember."

And this was the truth, for the girl did not know the name of the man whose life she had saved, for this subject had not been mentioned during the interview with the old strangler nor afterward.

"I mean the young man with the silver-like curls whose life you saved," Oriana said, making a guess at the truth and hoping to entrap the girl into a confession.

But Patience, although but a simple child of

nature, was gifted with rare, good common-sense, and the moment this announcement fell upon her ears the thought at once came to her that the young man whom she had risked so much to save would never have betrayed the secret to a stranger.

She penetrated the design of the other—the speech was made to entrap her into a confession.

Again she shook her head.

The imperious beauty plainly betrayed the annoyance which she felt.

"Why do you attempt to deceive me?" she cried. "Do you not see that I know all about it? What will you gain by this pretended ignorance?"

"I am not trying to gain anything," the other replied. "Your knowledge is evidently greater than mine."

"Do you mean to tell me that you do not know Highland Wyld, the Silver Sport, as he is called?"

"Now that you have described him, I understand who it is that you mean, but I never heard his name before; but I can hardly be said to know him. One night he missed the trail and found his way to this cabin, where he received shelter."

"Yes, yes, I know all about that!" Oriana cried, in her imperious way.

"And while in your cabin he was exposed to a great danger, from which you saved him. In reality, he has to thank you for his life."

Patience laughed: for one who had no experience in dissimulation, she was playing her part with wonderful skill.

"Why, you are making me out to be quite a heroine!" she exclaimed, as if she was amused at an idea which seemed to her to be supremely ridiculous.

In disgust, Oriana gave up the attempt to entrap the girl into a confession.

At this sort of game the other was evidently a match for her.

So she came to the purpose of her visit.

"Well, if you cannot give me any information in regard to this gentleman, perhaps you can tell me where I can find the man who owns this cabin—your father, I presume."

"Edmund Carson?"

"Gray Ed is the only name by which I know him."

"Possibly my father is so called, but I did not know it."

"He has gray hair, and a long gray beard?"

"Yes."

"That is the man I seek."

"He is not at home now, but will soon be here—within half an hour at the latest. Will you come in and wait?"

"Yes, if you are sure that he will be here within that time."

"There isn't any doubt about it, unless he is detained by some accident, which is not likely."

Oriana entered the house, conducted by Patience, who placed a chair for her with an invitation to be seated.

"Do you live here all alone with your father?" the half-breed beauty asked, with a glance around her, after she accepted the chair.

"Not now; I am making my home at present with some friends, for my father has some acquaintances visiting him, and there is not room here for me."

"And now you will have to excuse me, for I must return to my present abode."

Oriana nodded.

It was as well that the girl should be out of the way, for otherwise she would have had to request a private interview with the man she sought.

The girl departed, and Oriana watched until she vanished from sight with a lowering brow.

"I hate that minx, and if she gets in my way I will crush her!"

Within thirty minutes Gray Ed entered the cabin accompanied by Captain Colorado and Parson John.

They were surprised to see the lady, but guessed immediately that she had come to seek their aid, for they had been to Crested Hill that morning and had heard the story of the fight between the master of the Red Elephant property and the Silver Sport.

"I come to enlist your services," Oriana said.

"I seek vengeance, and I need bold and unscrupulous men to aid me."

"Oh, well, I guess you have come to the right shop," the captain replied.

"I think we can fill the bill if any one can."

"No doubt about it," Gray Ed assented.

"Oh, no, we are the boys who fear no noise when the guns and cannon roar, you will excuse my dipping into poetry. It is a weakness I have once in a while," the parson remarked.

"Don't mind him, marm, he ain't responsible for what he says more'n half the time," the gray-bearded giant observed.

"He will have his joke, you know, but he is perfectly harmless, I assure you," the other retorted.

"I do not think there is any doubt that you are the men I seek, and I am willing to pay liberally for any service you may be able to render me if you are at liberty to engage in an enterprise of danger."

"You see I do not attempt to disguise the matter from you. But the pay will be ample for the risk," the lady remarked.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE CONSULTATION.

THE three men looked at each other, and then both Gray Ed and Parson John nodded to Captain Colorado, thus signifying that they thought he ought to do the talking.

The captain did not choose to push himself forward. He had been the leader of the outlaw band in the old time, and now that the nucleus of a new gang was at hand, he was willing to again take the leadership if the others wished it.

"Do you want me to take charge of this matter?" he asked.

"Yes, I reckon you have a deal sight bigger head for that sort of business than either the parson or myself," Gray Ed remarked.

"Yes, yes, there isn't the least doubt about that. You are the boy to plan the game," the parson assented.

"Well, then, boys, you are quite willing for me to boss the job, and you don't care to put your oars in?" the captain remarked.

"No, no, you plan the thing, and we'll help to carry it out afterwards," Gray Ed exclaimed.

"Yes, that's the ticket?" cried the parson.

"In that case, then, make yourself scarce so as to give the lady and myself a chance to talk the matter over."

Both of the ruffians nodded assent, and then departed, glad of a chance to escape from the conference, for the pair had drunk heavily while in the mining-camp, and as the liquor was beginning to affect their heads, they were anxious for a chance to lie down and sleep it off.

After they were gone, Captain Colorado glanced around him for a moment, his brows contracted as though his mind was busy in thought.

"This seems a tolerable secure place for a conference, he observed, "but if there should be anybody in the neighborhood inclined to play the spy, the game might be worked without much difficulty."

"Yes, that is true, and there is a girl here—an artful creature, I am sure, who might take it into her head to try and overhear our conversation," Oriana exclaimed, quickly.

"Ah, you have seen her then?"

"Yes, Gray Ed's daughter."

"The same, Patience by name. A very fine girl indeed, although, as you observe, she has undoubtedly a wise head on her beautiful shoulders, and how such a villainous ruffian as Gray Ed ever happened to have such a daughter is a mystery."

"She was here when I came, but she told me that she did not live here at present, but was staying with some friends."

"Yes, the old man sent her away—after we made our appearance."

"Gray Ed, although he is an old pal of mine, has not that confidence in me that he ought to have," Captain Colorado remarked with a laugh.

"I was rather impressed with the girl, and suggested to Ed that it would not be a bad idea for me to make up to her, but he didn't cotton to the plan at all."

"Possibly the fact that I have had five or six wives already had something to do with it, but that is in the long ago, and none of them will ever be likely to find their way out to this wilderness."

"If I were you, and wanted the girl, I think I would contrive to get her in spite of her father," Oriana remarked.

"I am not one that is apt to give up a chase after I have entered upon it," the outlaw chief remarked, significantly.

"But enough of this now; for the present we have other fish to fry. What I was going to say was that I don't think it will be safe for us to hold our consultation in this room, for I presume we will speak upon some weighty matters, and if some acute listener should chance to overhear even a small part of our conversation, it might upset all our plans."

"Very true."

"Let us adjourn to the open air and select some spot where it will be impossible for any one to play the spy upon us."

"An excellent idea."

"There we can arrange our scheme in perfect safety."

The idea was a good one and it was carried out at once.

The pair left the cabin and went to where a stunted oak was growing amid a heap of rocks, while around for a hundred feet was open ground.

A better spot for a secret conference could not have been selected.

The tree gave shade, the rocks afforded seats, and it was impossible for any one to approach within a hundred feet of the place without being observed, as the short grass afforded no cover for a lurking eavesdropper.

"There, we can converse here without danger of being overheard," Captain Colorado re-

marked, after they took their seats upon the rocks.

"Have you heard what occurred in the camp last night?" she asked.

"About the fight between your husband and this Silver Sport?"

"Yes."

"I heard all the particulars this morning; I have just come from Crested Hill."

"I must be revenged upon this desperado!" Oriana exclaimed, fiercely.

"A very natural feeling under the circumstances, but you understand that it will be no easy matter to get the best of this sport."

Oriana nodded.

"He is no common man, you know."

"I understand all that!" she exclaimed, impatiently. "Samson was a great man in the olden time, but he had his downfall at last."

"Yes, but he managed to involve all his enemies in one common ruin," Captain Colorado observed. "I'm a little rusty in my biblical knowledge, but I remember that much, and it wouldn't pay us to conquer our Samson in that way."

"Oh, no; we must destroy him, and without encountering danger ourselves if it can be arranged, and I think I have hit upon a scheme."

Captain Colorado nodded his head approvingly. This suited him.

And then Oriana proceeded to explain her idea in regard to the road-agent business.

"Yes, yes, I think the plan can be made to work," the outlaw chief exclaimed, after she had finished. "One strong point will be that you can testify he played road-agent for you, and forced Murray to sign the paper at the point of the pistol."

And Colorado fell into a deep study for a moment.

At last he said:

"We must weave the web around him so skillfully that he will not be able to disprove the charge by showing that he could not possibly have been on the spot where the robberies were committed at the time they were done."

"And then the man who does the tricks must get himself up so as to resemble this Silver Sport as much as possible."

"I see!" Oriana exclaimed.

"He will be disguised, of course, but he must present an appearance such as Highland Wylde would assume if disguised."

"Exactly! you have the idea. I think I can get hold of some stuff which, by the dim, uncertain light of the moon, will look something like the Silver Sport's peculiar hair."

"I will do the road-agent business myself and I will arrange my disguise so that one or two little locks of light hair will peep out, just as if they had made their appearance by accident."

"Yes, yes; that will be excellent."

"And we must select as victims good reputable men whose testimony will be readily believed, and if we can arrange the matter so that these men will get the opinion that it is the Silver Sport who has robbed them, and swear strongly to that fact, the chances are big that we will be able to get him locked up."

"And as a good strong swearer is always important in a case of this kind, for one victim we will use the parson—that is my fat pard, you know."

The woman nodded, in token that she understood.

"We must have him robbed and give him to understand that it was this Silver Sport who did the trick, and the way the parson will testify when the trial comes off will be apt to make an impression, for he is a hefty man in that line."

And so the plot was arranged.

Half an hour later Oriana was on her homeward road, and as she rode along a fierce, wild joy filled her soul, for she felt sure that she had arranged a trap this time from which the Silver Sport would find it impossible to escape.

And then she fancied that the hint she had given the outlaw chief in regard to Gray Ed's daughter would be improved by him, and so she would be revenged upon her rival, for such she was sure the girl had been.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE ROBBERY.

JIMMY McMILLEN, the foreman of the Red Elephant Mine, was one of the steadiest men in the camp of Crested Hill.

He was not addicted to the use of strong liquor, was a prudent, saving fellow, and it was the general opinion in the town that McMullen was "well fixed," that is, to translate the slang into intelligible English, McMullen had not only made money, but had been wise enough to keep it.

Only one little luxury did the old miner indulge in, and that was a "leetle" game of poker now and then.

And nearly all the people who had ever taken a hand with the veteran in a little game would have resented with indignation any imputation that poker-playing was ever likely to lead the old miner to ruin.

On the contrary, the opinion would have been promptly made public that if McMullen could-

n't get a living in any other way, he would never be apt to come to want as long as he could play poker.

The veteran was both a skillful player and a lucky man, and although some of his adversaries, smarting under severe losses, would sometimes be tempted to remark that the old man was too "durned lucky" for his game to be an honest one, yet the closest watch had never detected any unfair play on the part of McMullen.

On this particular evening on which we write there had been quite a lively poker-party in the little private room at the hotel reserved especially for these social gatherings.

Landlord Somerset, of the Old Kentucky Home, had taken a hand, likewise John Kellerhan, the sheriff, who, passing through the camp on his way to attend to a little private business over on the New Mexico border, had stopped over for a day to break the journey, and then a couple of leading storekeepers of the camp had taken a hand for a while, until they had got rid of all the cash they had with them.

McMillen was there, also the Silver Sport, who, although an amazingly good player, was obliged to admit that on this occasion, in the veteran miner, he had met a foeman worthy of his steel.

The game lasted until nearly one o'clock, and then ended simply because McMullen had captured all the money that there was in the party.

"Durn my cats! I never did see such luck!" the Kentuckian exclaimed, in disgust, when the game ended.

"You kin smash me inter apple-fritters, if I've had a decent hand to-night, 'cept when there wasn't any money in the pot."

"I tell you what it is, Mac, if I didn't know that you was the squarest kind of a man, I should be mighty suspicious that you had four or five packs of keards hid away, so as to be able to fetch out jacks, and kings and aces whenever you wanted 'em."

The old miner chuckled.

"Oh, I reckon I play a squar' game, every time!" he replied.

"If you don't believe it, you are welcome to s'arch me, and for every keerd you find on me I'll agree to give you one of my fingers!"

"That is a fair offer!" the Silver Sport cried.

"Go for him, landlord! Hold him up, and see the aces drop out of his boots and sleeves."

"Well, there's no denying the fact that you have had to-night the biggest run of luck that I ever saw," the sheriff observed.

"Why, old man, you must be a clean thousand dollars ahead."

"Oh, not so much as that, I reckon," McMullen replied.

"You must be; I'm out nearly four hundred, myself!" Kellerhan insisted.

"I'm stuck for about three hundred I reckon," the landlord remarked, with a grimace, indicative of intense disgust, as he displayed an empty pocketbook.

"I reckon I can call the turn for a hundred and fifty, all the money I had with me," the Silver Sport observed.

"There's eight hundred and fifty, and then the two fellows who cleared out early in the game dropped at least a hundred apiece!" the sheriff exclaimed, figuring the amount up on his fingers.

"Oh, come, old man, you are fully a thousand to the good, and there isn't any two ways about it!"

"Don't say any more and I'll stand treat," replied the old miner, with a grin.

"You had better let some of us escort your home," the Silver Sport remarked.

"If you don't, some road-agent will go for you and get away with your plunder."

For reply McMullen tapped the revolver belted to his side in a significant manner, as much as to say that he was not afraid of any road-agent in the Territory.

Then the liquor was brought in and all indulged in a parting glass.

"It would be the richest joke of the season," the sheriff remarked, "if McMullen hyer on his way to the Red Elephant Mine should get skinned by some road-agent, after skinning us in the scientific manner in which he has."

"McMillen, I ain't anxious for to see you lose yer cash," the landlord observed, "but I would gi'n a dollar if some galoot should climb you to-night."

"I tell you, you had better hire me to go with you so as to protect you!" the Silver Sport exclaimed, banteringly.

Again McMullen slapped his revolver.

"This hyer is all the protection I want. I have bin west of the Mississipp now for a good many years, and no man ever had the gail for to hold me up yit, and I reckon no critter is a-going to make that riddle to-night."

"There has to be a first time, you know," Highland Wylde suggested.

"I reckon it won't come to night. So-long!"

And McMullen departed, while the rest retired to their apartments in order to seek forgetfulness of their discomfiture in balmy sleep.

The night was clear, the moon high in the heavens, and the camp of Crested Hill as silent as a cemetery.

The veteran miner did not have the least fear of being molested on his way to the Red Elephant property.

In the first place, there had not been any road-agents in the neighborhood for a long time.

When the camp first sprung up a couple of desperate fellows, "down on their luck," as the saying is, had tried to hold a man up in the outskirts of the town, but they had made a miscalculation in regard to their game and happened to run afoul of one of the coolest and pluckiest men in the town.

He pretended to be greatly afraid—begged that his life would be spared, hurried to get out his money, as the footpads supposed, but pulled a self-cocking revolver on them instead and wounded both of the would-be robbers so desperately that they died within a week.

This put a stop to the road-agent business, for since that time no one had ever attempted to play that game in the neighborhood of Crested Hill.

Although the veteran miner didn't believe there was any danger, yet he took the middle of the street so as to prevent any surprise from being worked upon him.

Any man with evil designs in his heart could not hide behind a house and take him at a disadvantage by jumping out in his path.

That the poker-party had been in operation was no secret, indeed, there was a window in the room where they had been playing which looked upon the street, and any passer-by could have noted the game if so inclined.

But although the Red Elephant foreman didn't believe there was any danger, yet the bantering talk about the road-agents had produced an effect upon him, and so he felt unusually nervous.

He drew a long breath when he was well out of the town, for he did not think there was half as much danger along the open trail as when in the shadow of the houses.

All the way through the camp he had carried his revolver ready cocked in his hand, but after he got well away from the camp, with a laugh at his foes, he returned the weapon to its holster.

McMillen had indulged tolerably freely in refreshments during the progress of the game, but owing to the excitement engendered by the playing the liquor had not produced any effect upon him, but now the powerful stimulant began to "get in its work," to use the Western saying, and the veteran felt that he was getting to be decidedly unsteady on his legs.

McMillen though was one of those strong-minded men whose heads are never materially affected by liquor, and on this occasion although his legs were getting to be unmistakably drunk, his brain worked as clearly as ever.

"Hang me! if I ain't getting shaky on my pins!" he muttered, as he strode along, striving to walk as straight as possible.

"These darned legs of mine are going back on me, and that ain't the ticket, nohow!"

"Confound that whisky! I've allers told old Somerset that he kept the worst liquor of any shebang in the camp!"

"Reg'lar p'ison and no mistake! Darn the thing! If my legs don't get over their wobbling pretty soon I will never be able to reach the mine, and I feel as if I could lie down hyer anywheres and drop off to sleep."

"If I did, I reckon it would be 'good-by, John' to my money. Some galoot would come along and go through me, for sure!"

By this time the veteran had reached the point where the river made its abrupt bend—the very spot where the owner of the Red Elephant Mine had been waylaid by the stranger.

McMillen was hurrying along with no dread of danger from road-agents now, his only anxiety being to reach the mine before his legs gave out, but when he approached the clump of bushes which was right at the bend, out from the shrubbery sprang a dark form, its outlines disguised by a rubber poncho, and the face covered with a hood, through which gleamed a pair of piercing eyes.

The new-comer grasped a revolver which he leveled at the head of the astonished McMillen.

"Hands up!" he cried.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A SHARP GAME.

McMILLEN was taken completely by surprise.

After coming safely through the town he had not the slightest apprehension that there would be any danger of his being waylaid on the trail.

He was supremely disgusted, for the moment the road-agent made his appearance he comprehended that the footpad had him at such a disadvantage as to prevent him from offering any successful resistance.

And he mentally cursed his stupidity in replacing his revolver in its holster after carrying it in his hand, ready for action, all through the camp.

If he had the pistol out, with the hammer up, ready for action, he could have promptly shot the road-agent the moment the fellow made his appearance, thus turning the tables upon him in a way he would have despised.

But, as it was, he was in a trap from whence, as far as he could see, there wasn't any escape.

Reluctantly then he obeyed the command of the unknown and elevated his hands, and it is safe to say that he never performed an action in his life more unwillingly.

"That is right, pardner," remarked the road-agent, in a gruff, unnatural tone, one evidently assumed to disguise his real way of speaking.

But in spite of the fact, the keen ears of the shrewd old man detected that there was something familiar in the voice.

He felt sure he had heard it before, and that the footpad was not an unknown whom he had never before encountered.

"Nothing like being agreeable," the road-agent continued, "and a polite request addressed by one gentleman to another gentleman ought always to be complied with; ha, ha, ha!"

And the unknown laughed as though he considered he had given utterance to a good joke.

"Maybe you think this hyer thing is funny, but I don't," McMillen growled, disgusted at the idea that the road-agent, not satisfied at getting him in a trap, was disposed to crack a joke at his expense.

"Ah, well, Jimmy, you have no taste for humor; you ain't the kind of man to enjoy a joke."

"You are almost as bad as a Scotchman whom I used to know down at El Paso. The boys always said he had so little appreciation of humor that the only way to get a joke into his head was to hit him with a pickax."

"Oh, you're too durned funny!" McMillen retorted, savagely.

He did not at all appreciate the pleasantry of the other.

"I see that it isn't any use to waste jokes upon you, so, with your kind permission"—and here the road-agent made an elaborate bow—"we will come right down to business."

"Jimmy, you are a fine poker-player, they tell me, but I reckon that in this game I hold a hand which lays over anything you can scare up. I 'call' you, four aces, Jimmy, and that's the best hand in the deck!"

This pleasant reference to the scientific game of poker filled the mind of the veteran with consternation.

Was it possible that the fellow was posted in regard to what had taken place at the Old Kentucky Home that night?

Did he know that there had been a little game, and that he, McMillen, had cleaned out all the other players, and that the spoils of war were safely stowed away in his capacious pocket?

If this was so, the game was up, and the money which he, by his superior skill and the assistance rendered him by Dame Fortune, had succeeded in wresting from the rest of the players, would fall into the hands of this night-marauder.

McMillen understood that, owing to the circumstances, he would be obliged to comply with the robber's demand, but he had thought out a shrewd scheme by means of which he reckoned he could evade surrendering his gains at the poker-table.

If the road-agent was not posted in regard to the social poker-party, he would not expect the miner to have any more money about him than that contained in his wallet, which was tolerably well lined, containing as it did nearly a hundred dollars; much more money than could be expected from the average man.

Now the veteran miner's plan was extremely simple.

He was going to pretend to beg off—tell the footpad that he had a deal of money in his wallet, and plead to be allowed to retain some of it.

The money which he had won at the poker-table he had stuffed down loose in the left-hand pocket of the old sack coat which he wore as carelessly as though it was of but little value.

"Look a-hyer, old man, you've got me foul, and no mistake!" McMillen exclaimed, with an expression of great good-nature, as though he had determined to make the best of the situation.

"Right you are, me noble Roman!" the road-agent cried, in his harsh, discordant tones.

"You never said a truer word in your life; I have got you where the hair is short, and don't you forget it!"

"But, I say, this is hard lines, you know, for I am well-heeled, financially speaking."

"Of course!" the footpad cried, immediately.

"And do you suppose I don't know it? Oh, no, that ain't the kind of man I am!"

"I reckon that before I get through with this camp of Crested Hill, the town will be ready to allow that I am one of the best-posted galoots that ever struck the burg."

"As yet the camp don't know much about me, for I haven't operated but once since I arrived here, and that was when I held your boss, Alex Murray, the Red Elephant man, up in this hyer very spot, and made him put his signature to a leetle document I wanted."

At this McMillen pricked up his ears, figuratively speaking, for this was the first reference which he had heard in regard to the matter.

Murray had not spoken of the affair at the time it had occurred, for he had regarded the man as a crank, and had not thought the matter worthy of mention.

The speculator was a close-mouthed fellow anyway, one not given to talking about his affairs.

And when he made the discovery of how he had been tricked, and the apparently worthless bit of paper which he had signed made its appearance in the shape of a note for fifty thousand dollars, he was too angry to reveal to any one how he had been fooled by the supposed crank.

"Yes, yes, Crested Hill hain't woke up to the fact yet that a first-class road-agent has set up business in the neighborhood, but you will turn on the gas to-morrow and then the camp will understand that she has got to be a metropolis, and no mistake!"

"An A No. 1 road-agent is all this town needs to let the world at large see that the place is booming right along!"

By this time the veteran comprehended that the footpad was no common rascal, but a man of both education and ability, and immediately he began to guess in regard to his identity, for he was sure he was not a stranger, the voice being familiar, despite the man's care to disguise it.

"I know you have a heap of money with you, Jimmy, my boy, and that is the reason that, like a good Samaritan, I pop up in your path so as to save you the trouble of carrying your plunder home."

A cold chill came over McMillen, for the words seemed to imply that the man had a knowledge of the poker-party.

But for all of this the veteran resolved to try and fool the fellow.

"I've got about a hundred in my wallet hyer," he said, as he drew the article from his pocket.

"Stop a bit!" commanded the stranger. "Before you go any further, just throw that six-shooter into the bushes."

"Choose some spot where you will be apt to find it again, after we get through with this little business, for I don't want to deprive you of your weapon, you know, particularly when I have such a good tool of my own."

And McMillen's attention being drawn to the weapon by this remark, he noticed that it was a handsome nickel-plated revolver, and the thought immediately came to him that he had seen just such a pistol before, but in whose possession it was he could not for the life of him remember.

He obeyed the road-agent's command and threw his pistol into the bushes.

"Your wallet is pretty well filled, I see, Jimmy," the stranger remarked.

"About a hundred I reckon, and I was going to ask if you wouldn't let me divvy with you, 'cos it will make me awful short if you get away with all of it."

"Divvy with you!" the road-agent exclaimed. "Why that is just the kind of man I am."

"Give me half and then shove the leather back in your pocket. You will have enough to stake you for a poker-game."

Again McMillen shivered. These references he considered ominous.

He divided the money, and replaced the wallet in his pocket.

"Have you a handkerchief, Jimmy?"

"I have," and the miner produced an old-fashioned, red bandana.

"Spread it out on the ground."

McMillen did as he was bid.

"Put the cash into it."

The miner obeyed.

"Now, Jimmy, go through your clothes and shell out the thousand odd ducats that you skinned the poker party out of this evening."

The command fell upon the ears of the astounded McMillen like a thunder-clap.

Vainly he protested; the road-agent only laughed.

"Be thankful that I don't take all your wealth," he said.

"After I have been gentleman enough to divvy with you on your wallet you ought not to complain."

"Come, shell out, quick, or I shall have to plug you for keeps!"

The miner was in the toils and, perforce, was obliged to obey.

The road-agent made him turn his pockets inside out so as to be sure to get all the cash, and then when McMillen had parted with the wealth he made him go on.

"Go on out of sight, wait about twenty minutes, and then you can come back after your weapon."

The miner started.

CHAPTER XXIX.

BREAKING THE NEWS.

McMILLEN was as disgusted a man as ever trod the earth as he walked slowly away from the spot where he had been despoiled.

If he had had a weapon he most surely would have attempted to give battle to the road-agent, although the veteran miner was not much of a warrior, being a quiet, peaceful man who attended strictly to his own business and kept out of all difficulties.

"Riled" as he was at the outrage which had been perpetrated upon him, yet knowing he was

helpless at present, there was no other course open to him but to obey the commands of the footpad.

But when he got a couple of hundred feet away, he could not resist the impulse to cast a glance behind him.

The road-agent had twisted the corners of the handkerchief together so as to make a bundle of the money, and was about rising to his feet as the miner looked around.

He had his eyes on McMillen, and noticed the backward glance immediately.

"Ta, ta!" he exclaimed, waving the bundle of money in the air.

"Give my respects to all the boys. You are a good poker-player, Jimmy, but you can't hope to take the pot from a man like myself who always plays with aces up his sleeve; so-long!"

And then the road-agent plunged into the bushes from whence he had come and disappeared from sight.

McMillen thought he had gone far enough away, so he sat down upon a rock to wait until the time fixed by the footpad should expire.

"Curse the scoundrel!" he exclaimed, in a rage. "I will be even with him, though, if it costs me every cent I have in the world."

"I'll organize a party and hunt the rascal down, although I don't suppose there will be much chance for me to succeed in that game, for after this rich haul the fellow will probably give leg-bail and get out of this part of the country as fast as possible."

"It was all gas and brag, of course, about how he was going to 'hang out' round this camp."

"But who the deuce is the fellow?"

And for fully ten minutes McMillen pondered over this question, for there was something so familiar about the man that the veteran was convinced that he had encountered him before.

"I will know in the morning," he muttered, at last.

"Yes, I will know in the morning, when I come to look around and see who is among the missing."

"The man who is not to be found is the man who did this job to-night."

By this time McMillen calculated that the time was up, so he retraced his steps and proceeded to hunt for his revolver.

The weapon was easily found, and then the veteran turned his steps toward the Red Elephant Mine.

Never in the course of all his long and checkered career had the old miner been more disgusted than he was by his untoward adventures on this occasion.

All he had to console him was the thought that he would be able to recognize the nickel-plated revolver and identify the handkerchief, if the road-agent dared to remain in the camp.

After a few hours of restless slumber, McMillen rose bright and early in the morning, attended to his duties in the mine, and then set off for the camp of Crested Hill.

"Mighty lucky thing that the sheriff is hyer," the veteran remarked as he strode along.

"John Kellerhan is like a bloodhound on the trail of such rascals, and as he is a big friend of mine he will be sure to take a hold of the matter and do all he can for me."

As he had expected McMillen found the sheriff at the hotel.

He was sitting in the saloon talking with the landlord, and they were discussing the wonderful run of luck which the veteran had enjoyed on the preceding evening when he entered.

"Talk of the Old Boy!" exclaimed Kellerhan, as McMillen made his appearance.

"You were talking of me, I reckon."

"We were and no mistake," the sheriff answered.

"We were jest a-saying that that air luck of yours last night jest beat all," the Kentuckian added.

"Do you think so?" asked the miner, with a grim smile.

"Do we think so?" Kellerhan exclaimed. "Well, now you can just bet your bottom dollar we do!"

"You air a good player, ole man," the landlord remarked in a philosophical sort of way.

"I ain't got ary word to say ag'in' your playing; you kin handle the keerds as well as any man I ever run across in my time, but for all that your luck last night was something great—rally colossal—and that is about the size of it."

"Oh, yes, I'm a lucky kind of a galoot," and the old miner smiled a sickly kind of smile as he made the remark.

"Yes, that's an old saying, 'A fool for luck,' but I'll be 'tarnally durned if that applies to you, for that's no foolishness 'bout you," the sheriff observed.

"Not much!" the landlord added, emphatically.

"Oh, yes, I'm jest as lucky as they make 'em—" McMillen remarked, but before he could proceed further in the speech the sheriff exclaimed:

"Well, I should smile! Why, durn me, if you didn't skin the crowd out of a thousand dollars as clean as a whistle!"

"Cleaner—cleaner than any whistle that was ever made," the Kentuckian declared.

"Oh, yes, so you believe, but what would you say, gents, if I was to tell you that I was way-laid arter I got out of the town by a durned road-agent, and robbed of every cent of the money I won, together with about fifty of my own that I had in my wallet?"

Both the sheriff and the landlord were amazed at this statement, and for the moment thought that the miner was trying to fool them.

But he soon convinced them that he meant what he said, and then he related all the particulars of the affair.

The man-hunting instinct of the sheriff was aroused at once, and taking out his pencil and memorandum-book he proceeded to take notes.

"Dog-gone me if this don't beat all!" the landlord exclaimed, when the story was finished.

"Do you think you would be able to identify the fellow if you saw him again?" Kellerhan asked.

"Well, I don't really know about that, for the cuss was disguised so that I couldn't make out what he was like, but I would know his voice again I think if I heard it, although he tried his best to alter it."

"But the pistol—the nickel-plated revolver—you would know that again?" the sheriff inquired.

"Oh, you bet I would. There ain't any mistake about that."

"I reckon I would know the feller's paws, too," the veteran continued, as the thought suddenly occurred to him.

"Aha, were there anything remarkable about them?" asked the sheriff, eagerly, all his professional instincts aroused.

"Yes, there was; the galoot was a good-sized fellow, a bigger man than I am, I reckon, but his hands were small—"

"Kind of a gambler's hands, eh?" cried Kellerhan, noting every point with true man-catching skill.

"Yes; not the hands of a man used to hard work—no such paws as mine, you know," and as he spoke the veteran held up his strong brown hands.

"I see, I see; that is a good point, and worth remembering."

"And then the cuss carried off my handkerchief, you know, and it is a kinder peculiar handkerchief. I reckon there ain't another like it in the camp; anyhow, I never saw one if there is."

"That was a blunder on his part, unless the fellow has sense enough to throw it away," the sheriff remarked, thoughtfully.

"And it is a funny thing, gents, but do you know, some of the biggest and smartest rascals that have ever existed have made just such blunders and have been caught, when if they had sense enough to have looked out for these little matters, they never would have been detected."

The others nodded; they had heard this statement before.

"Now then, old man, I'll just catch this fellow for you if he is in the camp," the sheriff continued.

"But if he has got any kind of a head on his shoulders, the chances are a thousand to one that he is far over the range long before this time."

"Any road-agent lucky enough to pick up a cool thousand dollars in one haul is the biggest kind of a fool if he don't put miles of country between himself and the spot whar he did the trick, as soon as possible."

"Yes, that is true enough, but, as you were saying, these bold sharps don't allers do the right thing at the right time," McMillen observed.

"And then, too, the fellow boasted that he was going to hang round the town, kinder levy toll on the people who used the roads; but that may be only talk!"

"Chiefly wind, I reckon," the sheriff remarked.

"Oh, yes, it don't stand to reason that the cuss would go to give away his plans," Somerset observed.

"Well, I don't know about that," Kellerhan replied, with a shake of the head.

"Some of these sharps are up to jest sich brags, and what is more, they make 'em good sometimes."

"Now the first point I get onto is the nickel-plated revolver."

"Thar ain't many weapons of that kind in the town, I reckon?"

The question was addressed to the landlord, for the Kentuckian, on account of his keeping the principal resort of the camp, was naturally supposed to be better posted about such matters than anybody else.

"Nickel-plated revolvers are skeerce," he remarked, with a shake of the head. "The only ones I kin recall jist at present belong to the Silver Sport."

The same thought had immediately occurred to all three.

Was it possible that the Silver Sport could be the mysterious road-agent?

And now that the circumstance was recalled to their memories, all of them remembered that the revolvers carried by Highland Wylde were handsome, nickel-plated weapons.

Somerset shook his head, as if thoughts which occupied his brain were ugly ones and he wanted to drive them away.

Both of the others followed his example.

Each man thought he guessed what the others were thinking about, and each one hesitated to speak out.

The sheriff was the first to break the silence.

"I'm a stranger and of course ain't very well posted in regard to the town, but it seems to me as if I hadn't noticed anybody else carrying a pair of nickel-plated revolvers round these diggings," he observed, slowly.

The landlord looked at McMillen as if he thought he ought to speak, and McMillen nodded to the Kentuckian as much as to say, "It's your turn to the floor, go it!"

And when the sheriff looked at him as if he expected he was going to speak, Somerset felt that he ought to comply.

"Waal," he said, very slowly, "I hate for to go and git any man inter trouble."

"But I'm durned if I don't believe ye are 'bout right in this hyer matter."

"I disremember any galoot in the camp having nickel-plated revolvers 'sides this Silver Sport."

"Yes, that's about my say-so, too," the old miner observed.

"Mind, I ain't saying that thar ain't gobs of nickel-plated we'pons in this hyer camp of Crested Hill, but what I do say is that just at present I can't call to mind any cuss what owns 'em."

Then again there came a dead silence for a few minutes, the three looking upon each other with an earnest expression upon their features.

"It is a mighty ugly business," Kellerhan observed, finally.

"I don't s'pose that the mere fact that this sport has nickel-plated revolvers, like the one that the road-agent used, is proof enough to go on for to warrant ye kicking up a fuss with him?" the landlord observed.

"Oh, no; that is only a sort of a clew, you know," the sheriff replied.

"Durn me if I understand it!" McMillen exclaimed, abruptly.

"If it was this Silver Sport who did the trick, he is the biggest kind of a fool to use his nickel-plated tools, such a dead give away, you know."

"As I told you only a moment ago, some of the smartest men who have ever lived have done just such foolish things," the sheriff replied.

"But, I say, how about this Silver Sport; is he still in town, or has he lit out over the range?"

"He was here ten minutes ago, for I saw him go down the street," Somerset asserted.

"Well, then, if he was the man who did the job that proves that he hasn't any idea of getting out; because if he was going to levant he wouldn't wait all this time."

"Mebbe he means to play the game jest as he gave it out to me," McMillen suggested.

"Mebbe he intends to play road-agent in this neighborhood until he gits a pile big enough to retire on."

"If he follows the business up I will nab him as sure as shooting!" Kellerhan exclaimed, decidedly.

"Well, what had I better do about this matter?" McMillen inquired.

"Keep it dark—say nothing," the sheriff replied, decidedly.

"It will not do any good to ventilate the affair."

"Just keep quiet and let this fellow go on with his bird's-egging."

"Yes; I should reckon that that air was the game," the Kentuckian observed, with a wise shake of the head.

"Don't let any of us say anything, and in future we must keep our eyes open, and see if we can't strike a lead," Kellerhan said, with the air of a sage.

"When you come to look into the matter, boys, this Silver Sport is just the kind of a man to go into a racket of this kind."

"He's a bold and dashy fellow, a sharp of the first water, you know. A man who wouldn't be apt to settle down naturally to any quiet avocation."

"Card-playing, or a game of this road-agent kind would be just in his line."

"Yes, yes, that is so," the landlord assented.

"He has been talking about going into some mining speculation ever since he has been here, and, in fact, I believe he has looked at some claims, but hasn't found anything to suit him."

"That is all a blind to throw folks off the track," the sheriff asserted.

"He is the man who did this job, and there ain't much doubt about it."

CHAPTER XXX.

WEAVING THE WEB.

The three men looked at each other for a moment.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE KENTUCKIAN IS SURPRISED.

The landlord had his face toward the door, and as he lifted his eyes when he heard the noise, he fancied that he saw the key turn in the lock.

But as the light was not strong and the room only dimly illuminated, Somerset was not sure on this point, and the thing seemed so utterly improbable that he was far more ready to believe that his eyes had deceived him than that the key had actually moved.

The idea appeared so ridiculous.

Here was the key on the inside of the door—only the extreme end of it perceptible on the outside.

How was it possible that any one in the entry could turn the key?

The Kentuckian was a "countryman," had lived in small interior villages all his life, and was not posted in regard to the marvelous tools which ingenious mechanics have invented in order to make rascality easy.

He did not know that by means of the powerful pair of pincers, which in the thieves "argot" is called "nippers," it is about as easy for an expert burglar to open a locked door from the outside as from within, if the key was in position.

But though the landlord did not believe it possible for any one to turn the key in the lock from the outside without making a deal of noise in the attempt, yet the suspicion at once flashed into his mind that some evil-minded person in the entry was trying to ascertain whether the door was fastened or not.

"I reckon he'll find that it is all O. K. though," the Kentuckian observed, with a chuckle.

And then, to his astonishment, as he glanced at the door it appeared to him as if the bolt of the lock was not visible.

There was a crack fully a quarter of an inch wide between the main lock and the catch, so that when the door was locked the brass bolt could be plainly seen.

And not being able to distinguish it, Somerset came to the conclusion that the door was unlocked.

"Yet I would have been willing to bet all I am worth that I turned the key after I came in," he muttered, not knowing how to account for this strange fact.

If he had understood burglars and their ways he would have instantly surmised that the slight noise which he had heard had proceeded from an expert cracksmanship turning the key in the lock from the outside.

"Don't make much difference, though, whether the door is locked or not," he continued with a dry chuckle.

"Not so long as that air big bolt is on the door, and I didn't forget to attend to that."

The bolt which guarded the door was an extra large one, and there wasn't any doubt that Somerset had not neglected it after entering the room, for it could be plainly seen that it was pushed into its socket.

"If anybody is outside a-fooling 'round the door, they will have some trouble to get in while that air bolt is thar, and I reckon that the moment they commence operations I will be ready to bore some good-sized holes through them with my six-shooter."

But the landlord had hardly finished the sentence and commenced to chuckle over the surprise which he had in store for the intruder, when the door opened abruptly—the bolt-socket coming with the bolt, the screws which apparently held it securely to the wall coming out without the least difficulty—and into the room came a disguised man, who presented a nickel-plated revolver at the head of the astonished Kentuckian, while with the other hand he closed the door behind him, evidently for the purpose of preventing any one who might chance to come along the entry from witnessing his "interview" with the host of the Old Kentucky Home.

The fellow answered exactly to the description given by McMillen of the road-agent who had waylaid him on the river-trail.

As was natural under the circumstances, the landlord started to shove his hand underneath the skirts of his coat as if to draw a revolver.

But the intruder checked the movement immediately.

"No, no! none of that!" he exclaimed, in the same gruff voice that he had used to conceal his real tones when conversing with the veteran miner.

"Don't attempt to pull any gun on me, or I will send you to the shades below so quick that you will not have time to yelp before you are in the other world!"

The Kentuckian was no coward, nor was he a man so careless of life as to wish to rush to certain death.

There was a ring in the tones of the outlaw—a gleam in his dark eyes that conveyed the impression to Somerset that the man would not hesitate to keep his word, and so he withdrew his hand—rather quickly, too—and then blurted out:

"What in Satan's name do you want here?"

"Important business brings me, gentle Ja-

red, or else I should never have taken the trouble to make this unceremonious call upon you."

The road-agent was putting in his "fine work," as Jimmy McMillen had aptly described it.

The landlord stared at the intruder for a moment, and then he glanced at the door which with its fastenings had yielded so easily to the outlaw, and a puzzled look appeared upon his face.

"Say! how in thunder did you push that bolt in without any trouble?" Somerset exclaimed, unable to fathom the mystery.

"Can't get the hang of it, eh?" quoth the intruder, with a chuckle.

"No, durned if I kin!"

"You don't suppose that I am a-going to tell you, do you?—don't suppose I'm going to give away my little game, so that you will be up to snuff hereafter?"

"Well, I reckon I will be able to find out," the landlord retorted, sulkily.

"I reckon you will when you come to examine the door after I dust out of this, and so I'll let the cat out of the bag."

"Knowing that I was going to make this call upon you, I prepared for it early in the evening."

"I am a master of my profession, I am, a very king of thieves, and what dodges I am not up to are not worth knowing."

"I reckon that's true!" Somerset grunted, in disgust.

"Oh, you can bet your bottom dollar on it."

"Well, as I was a-saying, intending to make this little business call upon you, I thought I would fix matters so I would be able to come in without disturbing you in the least, as I have."

"The scheme was simple enough."

"Your wife was out—you down-stairs, attending to business as usual, so it was an easy matter for me to get into this room."

"And when I was once in, how simple to take a screw-driver and remove the screws which held the bolt-socket and replace them with smaller ones which looked exactly like the others, but had no more power to hold the bolt against a pressure than if they had been so much putty."

The Kentuckian drew a long breath, and he could not help reflecting that he was a donkey not to have guessed the riddle before.

"And now, having satisfied your curiosity, let us come down to business," continued the intruder.

"Business?" exclaimed the landlord, with an apprehensive glance at the canvas bag on the table before him into which he had just put the money.

"Oh, yes; I'm strictly business, as you will soon discover."

"Jared, my boy, I have been appointed a committee of one to wait upon you in regard to the way you have been doing business."

"Eh?"

And the landlord stared: he was not a particularly bright man and didn't understand what the other was driving at.

"Yes, that is a fact."

"I suppose you have considerable difficulty in getting that through your wool, eh?"

"Well, yes; I don't understand it."

"Thar are some people in this hyer burg of Crested Hill who don't like the way you run things."

"For instance now, jest look at that bag of money—I s'pose thar's two or three thousand dollars in it, eh?"

"Oh, no; not over two or three hundred!" cried the landlord, hastily.

"Too thin, Jared, too thin, altogether!" the road-agent declared, with a wise shake of the head.

"I have sized up too many bags of money in my time to be easily fooled, and I know you've got a thousand in that sack easily enough."

"Now, then, this is what the people whom I represent don't like."

"You are going to send that money away—going to give it to the durned Express Company to carry out of the camp, and it is jest sich fool work as that that keeps this camp from going on a boom bigger'n a wolf."

"Now, I have been app'nted a committee of one to put a stop to it."

"That money must stay right hyer and be spent in the town where it will do some good, so have the kindness to hand it over."

And the road-agent outstretched his left hand toward the bag while with the right he covered Somerset with the revolver.

The landlord was in the toils, and he saw no way to escape.

If he attempted to resist he felt sure that the outlaw would not hesitate to shoot him immediately, seize the bag and trust to luck to make his escape before the rest of the inmates of the hotel became sufficiently aroused by the report of the revolver shot to cut off his retreat.

Somerset loved money, but he loved his life more.

"Oh, well, seeing as how it is you, I s'pose I will have to let you have your way," the Kentuckian observed, with a grim attempt at a

"One of the quiet, easy fellows, but with a deal of sand."

"Yes; he did put on considerable style," McMillen remarked.

"Good many fine touches—a reg'lar artistic piece of business—nothing low or common about it. The Silver Sport would be apt to do things right in that line," Kellerhan remarked.

"I s'pose you couldn't identify him?" the sheriff asked.

McMillen reflected over the matter for a moment and then shook his head.

"Oh, no; I couldn't do that, you know. Now that we three are talking here together, I don't mind saying that the road-agent was just such another fellow as this Silver Sport—just about his height and weight, and talked like him—as near as I could make out—for you must remember he tried to disguise his voice, and I am willing to say that I don't know any man in the camp who would fill the bill as near as the Silver Sport, but I didn't get on to him strongly enough for to warrant me in swearing his life away."

"Could you identify any of the money?" was Kellerhan's question.

"Oh, no; it was plain, common money, the same that I won from you fellows at poker."

Both of the others made a grimace at this and Somerset felt called upon to remark:

"It was a judgment on yer, McMillen, for skinning us, as sure as you're born!"

"Do you remember the Silver Sport was joking you about road-agents after we got through playing and suggested that you had better be on the lookout as you went home?" the sheriff remarked.

"Yes, and I s'pose that is the time he made up his mind to go for me, and when the cuss stopped me on the trail he did it like he was engaged in a poker-game."

"Don't say anything but keep your eyes peeled and maybe we'll catch him tripping," said the sheriff.

From that time forth all of the three kept a quiet watch upon Highland Wyld whenever he was in the neighborhood, and the inspection was conducted so carefully that the object of it had not the slightest idea that he was under suspicion.

But for all their pains the watchers did not succeed in ascertaining a single suspicious fact.

For three or four days this watch was kept up, and as the investigators did not make any progress they were about to despair when an incident occurred which startled the entire camp.

Somerset, the Kentuckian, the host of the Old Kentucky Home, was one of the "money-makers" of the town, and it was currently reported, and believed, that he was doing as well as any man in Crested Hill.

Of course, as there wasn't any bank in the camp, all who possessed any valuables, money, "dust" or jewelry were obliged to look after their property themselves.

A great many carried all they were worth on their persons in money-belts, or secreted in their clothing, and quite a number hid their "plunder" in their houses.

Somerset had a secret haunt where he was wont to deposit his gains until they reached a certain sum, and then by means of the Express he sent them to his bank.

On this particular night of which we write, the landlord was alone in his apartment, for his wife had gone away to spend the night with Mrs. Murray at the Red Elephant Mine.

He had closed the hotel up a little after midnight, then retired to his sleeping apartment, which was a good-sized room on the second floor in the front of the hotel, with windows looking on the street.

The door which led into the apartment was provided with a strong lock and a good-sized bolt.

After he entered, Somerset took particular pains to securely fasten the door.

Then he sat down at the table on which burned a candle and proceeded to count the money which he had taken in during the day.

The receipts had been a little over a hundred dollars, and after he straightened out his accounts the landlord went to his "strong-box," and brought out a canvas bag which was well filled with cash.

The landlord's strong-box was very ingeniously contrived.

There was a large closet in the room, and in the partition-wall between the room and the closet, near the floor, a hiding-place had been arranged, access to which was had by a little secret door in the interior of the closet.

In this hiding-place the landlord kept his cash until the amount was large enough to send away.

"Let me see," Somerset murmured, as he took out a paper from the bag upon which figures were written.

"This makes nine hundred and seventy-five. By noon to-morrow I'll have the other twenty-five, and then I'll Express the thousand."

He poured the money on the table into the bag, and as he did so he fancied he heard a slight noise.

mor, while a sickly sort of a smile came over his face.

"Yes, yes; that is the right way to look at the matter. I'm one of the nicest fellows in the world if I have everything my own way and nobody crosses me."

And as the outlaw spoke a scheme to defeat the robbery came into the brain of the landlord, and in a second he decided to try it on, for it seemed likely to work successfully despite the keenness of the intruder.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A CLEW.

THE idea was simple enough.

Somerset thought it out in an instant.

He would tender the outlaw the bag—give it up with a good grace, just as if he had made up his mind that there wasn't any use of attempting to resist him, and then, when the fellow attempted to make off with the plunder, he would take advantage of the road-agent turning his back to draw his—Somerset's revolver—and slay the man without mercy.

And the landlord inwardly chuckled as he pushed the canvas bag across the table toward the road-agent.

"As I said afore, seeing that it is you, I s'pose I will have to let her go, but I don't like it all the same, and you kin bet all the money that you will ever git ahold on in this world that you will never git a chance to ring in a cold deal of this kind on me again."

"Well, thar's no telling 'bout that, you know," the road-agent remarked, as he took the bag and hid it away under his *poncho*, which he wore evidently as a disguise.

"Mebbe I couldn't play this particular raffle on you again, but, bless you, I am as full of tricks as an egg is of meat, and I seldom play the same kind of a game twice."

"You'll get tripped up one of these days though, as sure as you live!"

"Mebbe so, but I am taking the risk of it, and when my time comes, if it ever does, I will not be the man to squeal."

"Now, Jared, since you have been so kind and accommodating about this little business I reckon I will have to trouble you once more."

"You are heeled, I suppose?"

A blank look came over the face of the landlord, for he suspected what was coming.

"Oh, yes," he answered.

"If I remember rightly, you go kinder light on this sort of thing and don't carry but one gun."

"One gun," repeated Somerset, almost mechanically.

"Have the kindness to hand it over," and with the leveled revolver the road-agent seemed to enforce the request.

"What do you want of my gun?" asked the Kentuckian, in a sulky way.

"Sort of a keepsake to remember you by, you know."

"Come! haul it out and hand it over, and be careful how you handle the thing too, don't go to fooling with the hammer, trying to cock it, or anything of that kind, for I am an awful suspicious chap, and if I should catch you trying any tricks of that description, the chances are about four million to one I should jump to the conclusion you were a-going to try to play some gum-game on me, and the way I would plug you would be a caution!"

"It would be a pity to have any unpleasantness now, arter everything has got along so nicely and so smoothly—arter I have captured the plunder too and am ready to light out."

Despite his attempts to look unconcerned, the landlord could not help revealing his disappointment in his face.

Yet, if he had not been a dull-witted man he might have known that a fellow who had shown himself possessed of as much cunning and audacity as the stranger, would not be apt to fall the victim of so shallow a trick.

The road-agent noticed the expression upon the Kentuckian's face as he reluctantly handed over the revolver, and he burst into a loud laugh.

"Ha, ha, ha!" he exclaimed. "Upon my word, Jared, I believe you did have a notion of trying some sort of a funny trick upon me."

"Well, now, strike me cold! if I thought you would be up to anything of that kind."

"Why, old fellow, you didn't think I was so durned green as to be taken into camp by any easy trick, did you?"

"Oh, no; you will find that I am one of the kind of birds that you must rise early in the morning to put salt on the tail of."

"And now I will say ta, ta."

Then he began to back slowly toward the door, and when he reached it, halted, and, fixing his glittering eyes upon Somerset, remarked:

"Now, then, my dear old pard, I will have to trouble you to turn your back for about five minutes, and remain motionless for about the same length of time, so as to give me a chance to get out of this."

The landlord rose slowly to his feet.

His thoughts in regard to attempting the

capture of the intruder were in his mind, but nothing tangible.

All throughout the interview he had been attentively studying the person of the intruder with the idea of being able to identify him again.

Of course the suspicion that the mysterious road-agent was Highland Wylde, the Silver Sport, was strong in the mind of the Kentuckian, and under these circumstances it was not wonderful that he came to the conclusion the disguised man was the cool, quiet, but desperate sport.

"I'll send this little gun back to you arter a while, seeing as how you are so obliging about the matter," the road-agent remarked, as he took the landlord's weapon in under the *poncho*, evidently for the purpose of stowing it away in his belt.

And as he half turned his head at the moment, Somerset caught a glimpse of a stray lock of his hair visible through a hole in the hood which he wore, and which was such a complete disguise.

The hair was both long and light, and the Kentuckian felt positive that the stray lock which he saw was one of the silver curls of Highland Wylde.

Then the hands, too, muscular, but small and white, were like the hands of the Silver Sport, and if they were not his, the landlord couldn't call to mind another man in the town who could lay just claim to such peculiar hands.

In the mind of Somerset there wasn't the least doubt that he had hit upon the truth, and so he was partially reconciled to the escape of the road-agent, consoling himself with the thought that he could easily lay him by the heels when daylight came, for of course the marauder couldn't have any idea that his disguise had been penetrated.

The moment the landlord turned his back the outlaw dextrously whipped the key out of the lock and inserted it on the outside.

Then, passing rapidly through the portal, the marauder closed the door carefully behind him and turned the key in the lock, thus making the landlord a prisoner, and this was done so speedily and noiselessly that Somerset was not conscious of the moment when the road-agent quitted the apartment.

With his face to the wall and his back to the door, the landlord waited for his unwelcome visitor to depart, wondering all the while, too, what the fellow was up to that he was keeping so quiet, never suspecting that he had left the room.

"Isn't that five minutes about up?" he asked, after having waited for what seemed to him to be a terribly long time.

There was no answer, and then the truth flashed suddenly upon the Kentuckian.

"I reckon the fellow has lit out," he exclaimed, as he turned around.

"Now what is the programme?" Somerset cried, as he hurried to the door.

"Shall I give an alarm, raise the house and attempt to chase the durned galoot, or shall I rouse the sheriff and put the matter into his hands?"

A moment's reflection convinced him that the latter course would be by far the best.

The sheriff was used to such things, and would know exactly how to act, while he was green at thief-taking.

Then, too, if the marauder was the Silver Sport, as the landlord firmly believed, he would not attempt to leave the house, but would take refuge in his own room.

So there wouldn't be the least use of kicking up an excitement and rousing everybody in the hotel with the idea of capturing a man who by this time was undoubtedly snugly locked in his own room.

It only required a few moments for the Kentuckian to revolve these matters in his mind and come to the decision that the sheriff was the man for his money; then he essayed to open the door and made the discovery that he was locked in.

"Durned if the galoot ain't worked the thing right up to the handle!" Somerset exclaimed, when he made this discovery.

For a moment the landlord was puzzled in regard to how he should be able to get out.

Either he must raise an outcry and alarm the house, or else wait until morning.

And then as he puzzled over the matter a bright idea came into his head.

The sheriff occupied the next room to him, as it happened, and by knocking on the wall he could undoubtedly awaken the official without disturbing anybody else.

The Kentuckian was quick to put this plan in execution.

Selecting a spot near where he thought the head of the sheriff's bed would come, he rapped on the wall.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE SEARCH.

As it happened, Kellerhan was a light sleeper, and the rapping on the wall awoke him almost immediately.

The hotel was no exception to the usual run

of buildings on the frontier, where all building materials are extremely dear and labor also commands a high price, and had been run up as cheaply as possible, so the partitions between the rooms were thin, and by raising the voice a conversation could be carried on between two parties in different rooms.

So the moment the sheriff woke up he listened for a moment to make sure that the raps were intended for him, and then, putting his mouth close to the wall, called out:

"Hallo! what do you want?"

"It's me, Somerset," responded the landlord, with his usual disregard for English grammar.

"What's up?" exclaimed Kellerhan, springing to his feet, for he anticipated now that something was amiss.

"I'm locked in from the outside. Come and let me out!"

It did not take the sheriff long to dress, and within five minutes he unlocked the door and entered the landlord's apartment, full of wonder in regard to what had occurred.

Briefly the Kentuckian told his story, to which Kellerhan listened with utter astonishment.

As he said, it did not really seem possible that the road-agent would try so bold a game.

"Well, he's done the trick, and slick as a whistle too," the landlord observed with a doleful face.

"A good thousand dollars in the bag, and the galoot got away with all of it!"

And then he related how he had noticed the color of the marauder's hair through the hole in the hood, and the conviction had forced itself upon his mind that the disguised road-agent was the Silver Sport, Highland Wylde.

"Let me see; he has a room hyer, hasn't he?" the sheriff asked, after reflecting on the matter for a few moments.

"Yes."

"Whar'abouts?"

"In the rear of the house."

"Well, he's our game just now!" Kellerhan exclaimed, decidedly.

"The chances are big, you know, that he has gone right to his own room, and that if we jump in on him thar, we will be able to git our clutches on the bag that he robbed you of, 'cos he won't have no notion that we are onter him so soon."

This reasoning seemed good to the mind of Somerset, and he so expressed himself.

"Take one of my revolvers in case the fellow shows fight," said the sheriff.

"No, I don't need it, thank you. I've got another one in my trunk."

So Somerset hastened to get out his weapon, which he immediately loaded, while Kellerhan examined his own tool to see if it was in perfect order.

"You see," the sheriff remarked, while these preparations were going on, "being right in the house hyer it was the easiest thing in the world for the galoot to git posted 'bout everything."

"Right you air."

"And that is how he came to do the trick up so fine."

"Yes, yes, no doubt about it."

"Are you ready?"

"You bet."

"Come on then."

"I had better take the candle, hadn't I, so we will have some light on the subject?" the Kentuckian observed.

"Oh, yes, by all means."

"I reckon we will stand a good chance to take this galoot by surprise, smart as he is."

"That is just my calculation," the sheriff replied.

"The chances are big that he will not suspect his disguise is penetrated. His reckoning is that you will believe the road-agent was an outsider, and will never guess he is an inmate of the house."

"Acting on that idea you will make a rush for the outside of the hotel just as soon as you think you can do so without danger of being shot by him, and he, safely hidden away in his room, is no doubt chuckling in his sleeve about this time."

"And how easily he has done the trick and got away with my cash," remarked Somerset, savagely, very much disgusted at the way he had been treated.

"If he laughs now, soon it will be our turn," Kellerhan remarked, as the two proceeded into the entry.

Somerset led the way to the door of the room occupied by the Silver Sport.

"What is the programme?" the host asked, in a whisper as he came to a halt before the door of Wylde's room.

"Shall you speak to him or I?"

"You had better do it. If he found that I—the sheriff—was here before he opens the door, it might excite his suspicions that something was wrong, and he would vamoose the ranch through the window."

"Yes, that is so."

"Knock at the door and tell him that you want to see him on some particular business. He will jump at once to the conclusion that you want to consult with him about the rob-

bery, and, of course, will gladly open the door so as to advise you how to catch the road-agent."

"The dog-goned rascal!" and the Kentuckian shook his fist menacingly at the closed door.

"Don't swear! you won't catch any fish!" remarked the sheriff, dryly.

Somerset rapped at the door.

The Silver Sport was evidently a light sleeper, for the sound roused him immediately for he responded at once.

"Hallo! who's there?"

"It's me, Somerset, the landlord," responded the Kentuckian, in rude defiance of the rules made famous by Lindley Murray.

"What do you want?"

And then the listeners without heard the bed creak, as though the occupant was rising from it.

"I want to see you on some important business. Open the door so I can talk to you."

"All right—wait a minute until I get into my harness," was the response.

Then the pair heard the Silver Sport strike a match, evidently for the purpose of lighting his candle, so that he could see to dress, and they could hear him moving around the room.

"It's dollars to cents that he is hiding the plunder away," Kellerhan whispered in the ear of the other.

"Yes, he didn't calculate he would be disturbed so soon."

"Oh, we've got him foul, and don't you forget it. Can't you see through the keyhole?"

This struck Somerset as being a good idea, and so stooping he essayed to play the spy, but after a moment's inspection, gave it up with a shake of the head.

"No go," he said.

"The durned galoot has got the key fixed in the lock in such a way that you can't see into the room."

"Oh, he's a cunning rascal," the sheriff remarked, "but we will get him dead to rights for all his cunning."

"You bet on that!" and firm was the air of determination with which the landlord grasped his pistol.

During this wait Kellerhan had been revolving a plan of operations in his mind, and having arranged the scheme to his satisfaction, lost no time in communicating it to his companion.

"I reckon this fellow is pretty quick on the 'draw,'" he remarked to Somerset, "and we mustn't give him any chance to get out a weapon."

"I think the odds are big that we are going to take him by surprise, and if we do catch him foul we must be careful not to let him get out of the scrape afore we secure him."

The landlord nodded; this seemed sense.

"So, the moment he opens the door I will go for him red-hot."

"Thar's a pair of handcuffs in my pocket, and when I make him throw up his hand, you get the bracelets out and snap them on him."

Again Somerset nodded, and a fiendish grin spread over his face as in anticipation he enjoyed the discomfiture of his foe.

"You want to keep cool, you know, and don't be in too great a hurry," the sheriff continued, with the true professional fear that his assistant by undue haste might spoil the "business."

"Oh, that is all right; I am as cool as a cucumber. Don't you worry; I won't make no bad break."

A stop was put to the conversation at this point by the Silver Sport approaching the door.

He turned the key in the lock and then opened the portal wide, evidently without the least suspicion that there was anything amiss.

The moment the door opened Kellerhan stepped promptly forward, and "covering" Highland Wylde with his cocked revolver, cried:

"Throw up your hands—you are my prisoner!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

AN IMPORTANT FIND.

NEVER since this world began was a man more taken by surprise than was the Silver Sport by this entirely unexpected proceeding.

He was only half-dressed—nothing but his pantaloons and shirt on, and was so totally unsuspecting of any danger threatening him that he had not taken the precaution to buckle on his belt containing his revolver, nor to wear his coat with the trusty derringers in his side pocket.

"Hallo, hallo! what the deuce do you mean by this proceeding?" he exclaimed, staring at his visitors with an expression of the greatest surprise.

The astonishment seemed to be so genuine that if the sheriff and Kentuckian had not been sure of their game, it would, undoubtedly, have caused them to think they had made some mistake in laying the crime at the door of the Silver Sport.

But as it was—having such indisputable proof

that he was the man they sought—the expression upon his face only served to show them that he was a first-class rascal.

"Oh, nothing much, only a little sort of a joke on our part," the sheriff responded.

Kellerhan was disposed to be facetious now that he found the game was in his hands.

His quick eyes had noticed that the Silver Sport was unarmed, unless indeed he had a pistol concealed in his bosom, which he did not think was likely, for there did not seem to be the least doubt that the suspected man had been taken entirely by surprise.

It was rather odd, too, it seemed to the sheriff, that such an out-and-out sharp could be "taken into camp" in such an extremely easy manner, but then the sharpest of men are caught napping sometimes, and he supposed it had been so in this case.

"Only a little joke—a leetle, practical joke," the sheriff repeated.

"I'll explain the hull thing to you in a little while. Sorry to trouble you, you know, but these little accidents will occur."

"Now if you will have the kindness to hold your hands out while my pard hyer snaps the bracelets on, I will be much obliged to you."

And while the sheriff was speaking, the landlord ran his hand into Kellerhan's pocket and brought forth the handcuffs.

A fierce expression came into the clear eyes of the Silver Sport as he perceived the glittering "bracelets," and understood that it was the intention of his unexpected visitors to adorn his wrists with the ornaments. He cast a sideway glance at the bed where lay his belt which contained the revolvers, and the sheriff easily understood that if Highland Wylde had possession of his weapons he would not have submitted without a struggle to the disgrace of being put in fetters.

"No, no, that game won't work!" Kellerhan warned, sternly, as he noticed the furtive look.

"Don't try to come any monkey business, or else I shall be obliged to fill you full of bullet-holes!"

"I mean business every time, and don't you forget it! It isn't the least bit of use for you to kick, you know; you are in for it, and might as well take the matter quietly."

"But what is the meaning of this outrage?" the Silver Sport demanded.

"What have I done that you should want to fetter me like a criminal?"

And there was such a glint of fire in the eyes of the speaker that the sheriff was really apprehensive that, although the sport was wholly unarmed, and with his life at the mercy of his assailants, apparently, he might venture upon a struggle.

And Kellerhan was not anxious for this, despite the fact that all the advantages were on his side, and he held the Silver Sport in such a situation that it seemed certain any attempt at resistance on his part would only lead to certain death.

But the sheriff was too old a man—had seen too much of life, not to understand how much truth there is in the time-honored saying that "There is many a slip between the cup and the lip."

If the prisoner, in his desperation, attacked him, weaponless as he was, and his bullet should not happen to hit Highland Wylde in a vital spot, so as to lay him out on the instant, or if the revolver should chance to miss fire—such things are happening every day—then the contest would not be such an uneven one, for a man possessed of the muscular powers appertaining to the Silver Sport, who could knock out such bruisers as Dublin Tricks and the Birmingham Infant, would not have much trouble in getting away with two men like himself and the landlord.

So the sheriff thought it best to attempt to reason about the matter with the suspected man, and thus avoid a struggle.

"Say! you ain't done anything that you have any cause to be ashamed of, have you?" he asked.

"No, not to my knowledge!"

"What is the use of trying to be ugly about the matter, then?" Kellerhan argued.

"Thar has been an accusation lodged ag'in' you, and it is my duty as an officer of the law to take you into custody."

"Of course I don't know anything about your innocence or guilt, but if you are not guilty, I should reckon that thar isn't any cause for you to be alarmed and to cut up rusty about the matter."

"That is the way I figure it."

"There isn't any doubt that there is a great deal of truth in what you say, but innocent men are sometimes unjustly accused and unjustly punished. For all that, though, as I know my skirts are clear, I reckon I'll have to let you put on the handcuffs, although it is the first time that my wrists were ever ornamented in that way."

"Ah, well, we all have our ups and downs in this world, and no man can ever tell a day ahead what is going to happen to him," Kellerhan observed, in what he considered to be a consoling way, as Highland Wylde extended his

hands and the landlord adjusted the handcuffs on them.

After the Silver Sport was securely fettered the sheriff directed Somerset to close the door—the two had entered the room to handcuff the prisoner.

"We don't want any interlopers in this business," Kellerhan remarked.

"Although I reckon there isn't much danger of anybody passing by at such an hour as this, yet some straggler might happen along."

The Silver Sport sat down upon the only chair that the room contained, for the intruders had hastened to take possession of the bed, upon which lay the belt of arms, and, perceiving that it was the evident intention of his visitors to hold a confab with him, said:

"Now then, gentlemen, will you have the kindness to explain the meaning of this strange proceeding?"

"Certainly," replied the sheriff.

"My friend, hyer, Mr. Somerset, has just been robbed of over a thousand dollars by a masked man with a nickel-plated revolver—the very same road-agent who stopped Jimmy Mc Mullen when he was on his homeward road on the night when we had the poker party hyer in the hotel—and got away with all the money that Jimmy won that night."

The Silver Sport appeared amazed at this intelligence, and again the expression appeared to be so genuine that the others thought they had never before met so capital an actor.

"You surprise me!" Highland Wylde remarked, perceiving that the others expected him to say something, but not knowing exactly what to say.

"Well, by my advice, Jimmy kept quiet about the matter so that I would have a chance to nab the man," the sheriff remarked.

"I reckoned that the fellow having made out so well in the first heat would be anxious for another go, although I admit, I didn't think he would strike so near home as to go for somebody right in the hotel hyer."

"And metoo of all men in the world!" Somerset exclaimed.

"I suppose, judging by this raid you have made upon me to-night, that you think I know something about this matter," the prisoner remarked.

"Oh, yes, we think you are the man who did the trick!" Kellerhan replied.

"Nonsense!" the Silver Sport exclaimed.

"Nary nonsense!" exclaimed the landlord, angrily. "You are the man who did the job. I kin swear to that nickel-plated revolver of yours, and then, too, although you had a sort of a hood over yer head, I saw that tow hair of yours through a hole in it!"

"Oh, this is ridiculous!" Wylde exclaimed, exasperated at the accusation.

"Nary time; we have got you down, dead to rights!" the sheriff declared. "And you have got the plunder stowed away somewhere right in this room—in the bed mebbe!"

And then Kellerhan pulled the clothes off the bed, but all he discovered was a neatly-folded rubber blanket which had been concealed under the bedclothes at the foot of the bed.

"That's the very identical poncho he wore as a disguise!" Somerset cried.

CHAPTER XXXV.

GATHERING PROOF.

THE Silver Sport surveyed the poncho with apparently fully as much surprise as the other two.

"Aha!" cried the sheriff, "what do you call this?"

"It looks like a rubber blanket, as far as I can make out," Highland Wylde replied.

"It's a poncho!" Somerset exclaimed.

"Thar's a hole in it for him to put his head through, and that's the article he wore as a disguise, and if it isn't a poncho, I'll eat it—sure!"

"I reckon you will find it a tough morsel to swallow, and a still tougher one to digest if you succeeded in getting it down," the Silver Sport remarked, apparently not in the least impressed by the gravity of the situation.

"Well, you're a cool hand, anyway," the sheriff observed.

"But you know, of course, before I open it, whether it is a poncho or not."

"Nary time!" Highland Wylde replied, immediately. "I never saw the article before; it doesn't belong to me."

"But it was in your bed."

"That doesn't prove that it was mine, though, for all that."

"I didn't make the bed, and, as you saw, it was under the clothes."

"I never owned a rubber blanket, or poncho either, for that matter, in my life! I hadn't the least idea that the thing was there, and you had better interview the chambermaid who made the bed; she may be able to throw some light on the subject, for I honestly swear I can't."

"Oh, of course, it is a likely story that the chambermaid should go and stick a rubber blanket which don't belong to you in your bed!" the landlord exclaimed, sarcastically.

"That is a leetle too thin, Mister Wylde,"

the sheriff observed, with an ominous shake of the head.

"Thin or not, it is the truth as far as I am concerned!" the Silver Sport retorted, stoutly.

Then the sheriff unfolded the article.

It was a *poncho*, as the rubber blanket is called which is made with a hole in the middle so it can be worn as a cloak, after the Mexican fashion.

"Didn't I tell you so?" the landlord exclaimed, when the true character of the article was revealed.

And then a cry of satisfaction escaped from the lips of the two searchers, for forth from the folds of the *poncho* dropped a hood, similar to the one which the disguised road-agent had worn as a mask, if it was not actually the same, but in regard to this there was not the least doubt in the minds of the two men.

The Silver Sport appeared to be more and more amazed.

"What do you call this?" cried the landlord, as he picked up the hood and proceeded to draw it on over his fist.

"It looks like a kind of a cap," Highland Wylde replied, apparently perplexed by these strange circumstances, and yet not particularly alarmed.

"It is the very identical hood which you wore on your head when you got away with Jimmy McMullen's money, and the same one that you wore to-night when you levied on my cash."

"See!" and Somerset held up the hood so it could be inspected.

"Here are the holes for the eyes and mouth, and hyer is the tear in one side through which I saw this fellow's tow hair, so I am able to swear he was the galoot who got away with my plunder so neatly."

"Oh, come now, this is putting it on too thick!" the Silver Sport protested.

"Not a bit of it!" the sheriff replied.

"Don't be an idiot, man! Look at the matter as it is," Kellerhan continued.

"Hyer is the road-agent's disguise, found in your room, and thar's no mistake about it! If that isn't pretty strong evidence that you are the guilty man then I don't know what evidence is."

"Hold on a bit—don't be in a hurry to jump to a conclusion!" the sharp exclaimed.

"Just remember that it wouldn't be a difficult task for anybody to get into this room. The lock on the door is only a common concern that almost any ordinary doorkey would unlock—"

"How did the road-agent get into your room by the way?" he asked, abruptly.

"Turned the key from the outside in some durned mysterious manner," responded the host.

"Worked it with a pair of nippers; an old trick," observed the sheriff, who, of course, was posted in regard to this sort of thing.

"He fixed the bolt during the daytime by removing the screws and putting on smaller ones."

"Another old trick," said the official.

"Why, Wylde, you must be a first-class professional to be up to all these dodges."

"The man who did the job was a first-class professional, as you say, and there isn't the least doubt about it, but I am not the man."

"Now, consider, would it be a difficult matter for an A No. 1 operator, as this road-agent evidently is in the burglar line, to get into this room, and sneak this *poncho* in under my bed-clothes so as to throw suspicion upon me?"

"Oh, no, the trick could be done," Kellerhan replied, immediately. "But I say, old fellow, you can't get out of the scrape in any such thin way as that."

"Not much!" the Kentuckian cried, emphatically. "I can swear to them nickel-plated revolvers of yours—I don't believe thar's another pair in the town—and then I am certain I saw the color of your hair through the hole in the hood, and you know durned well thar ain't a man, woman or child in the camp with sich odd-colored hair as yours!"

"I guess you are right about that," the Silver Sport admitted.

"But I am not guilty, all the same."

"Old man, you must own up that it looks mighty rough for you now," the sheriff remarked.

"Oh, no, not at all. This is some put-up job—some enemy of mine is trying to weave a web around me, but I reckon I will break through it in the end."

And as the Silver Sport spake there flashed across his mind the remembrance of Oriana Marshal, now the wife of the Red Elephant owner, and the oath of vengeance which she had sworn.

Was it possible that this was some plot of her contriving?

Despairing of being able to accomplish anything against him by open force she had resolved to try what secret cunning could do.

In his heart of hearts he felt satisfied that this revengeful woman was at the bottom of the mischief.

"That is right—keep your courage up; never say die, old man! That is the right spirit; even though it is exercised in a bad cause."

"You will find out that I am not the man,

sheriff; you are barking up the wrong tree, although I don't wonder at your thinking I am the party, for appearances are against me and no mistake."

"This *poncho* and hood being found here looks like pretty strong evidence, but you have had experience enough to understand, Kellerhan, that the party smart enough to do the trick on Somerset's door in such a first class style wouldn't be bothered to get into my room and deposit these things in my bed so as to throw suspicion upon me."

"An expert burglar, as this fellow evidently is, could do the trick without any trouble."

"Then, see, if I am the man, I am not showing much cunning in leaving these tell-tale evidences of my crime where they could be so easily found."

"Oh, well, we came so quickly on you that you didn't have any chance to hide the disguise away," the sheriff exclaimed, thinking he had hit upon the truth.

"Yes, yes, not a doubt of it; you didn't think any one would be after you so mighty sharp!" the landlord cried.

"In that case the money that you say was stolen from you must be around the room somewhere—the thousand dollars, you know, that you lost, for if I am the man who did the trick, and didn't have time to hide the disguise away securely, the same rule ought to hold good with the money."

The sheriff and the landlord looked at each other, and then they nodded in concert.

There was no gainsaying the wisdom of the remark, and the face of Somerset brightened as he reflected that soon he might be in possession of his cash.

"But you can bet all you are worth and ever expect to be worth that the man who smuggled the *poncho* and hood in wasn't stupid enough to throw away any of the cash."

"In fact, I think that, like my esteemed friend Somerset, here, with the *poncho*, I would be safe in agreeing to eat all the money you can find in this room, with the exception of about ten dollars that I have in my wallet, and a hundred ducats, more or less, which I have in a money-belt buckled around my waist."

The earnest tone in which the Silver Sport spoke rather staggered the pair.

If he was the road-agent, he knew, of course, whether the money was in the room or not—and if it wasn't where had he concealed it?

CHAPTER XXXVI. HELD FOR TRIAL.

At the search the two went.

The room was a small one, only about nine by twelve, and the furniture was scanty in the extreme.

There was a single cot-bed, one chair and a wash-stand.

As Somerset had often remarked, when some Eastern tenderfoot had remonstrated with him upon the small amount of furniture allotted to the sleeping apartment:

"I reckon you didn't expect to find a first-class St. Louis hotel out in these yere diggings, did yer, with hot water and steam heat and all them durned fixings?"

"If you did, you will be durned disappointed, and don't you forget it."

"This yere is as good a grub-house as you kin scare up in Arizona, and if you don't like it you kin git up and dust as quick as you please, and that is the kind of a mule-team I am!"

Naturally, in such a contracted apartment, there wasn't much chance to conceal anything.

There wasn't any mattress on the cot, for the bed part of it was constructed out of canvas after the fashion of a sailor's hammock, and the bed-clothes consisted merely of a pair of blankets and an extremely poor apology for a pillow stuffed with straw.

There was no carpet upon the floor, so there wasn't any chance to conceal anything under it.

The only likely place in the room where so bulky an object as a good-sized bag of money could be concealed was in the pillow, and it did not take long for the searchers to satisfy themselves that the pillow contained nothing more valuable than the straw with which it was stuffed.

In ten minutes' time the search was given up as a bad job, and the Silver Sport laughed outright when the pair paused and looked around them in bewilderment.

"Well, you didn't make the rifle, did you?" Highland Wylde remarked.

They had not neglected to search the sharp, and found that his statement in regard to his wealth was correct.

"Oh, but you are the man who got away with it—I know you are! Thar ain't the least bit of a doubt about it!" the landlord declared, in an aggrrieved sort of way.

"And since you are found out you might as well make a clean breast of it and give me a chance to get back my money."

"It will go a durned sight harder with you if you don't; ain't that so, sheriff?"

Naturally Kellerhan assented.

"Nonsense! you haven't proved me guilty yet!" the Silver Sport retorted.

"I tell you you have got the wrong pig by the ear, as you will find out in time."

"This is all a cunning trick to throw suspicion upon me while the real culprit gets out of the way with the plunder."

"Well, mebbe it is, but we will hold on to you and give you a trial all the same, though!" the sheriff declared.

Somerset looked disconsolate.

To catch the bold road-agent was something, but he had far rather recovered his money and permit the marauder to escape.

The Silver Sport was allowed to finish dressing, and then he was conveyed to the "smoke-house," as the town lock-up was locally known, and there placed in charge of the city marshal, who was a big, burly fellow known as Jake Coburn.

Coburn was one of the hardest cases in the camp, and for that reason he had been appointed marshal, the people of Crested Hill arguing that, as he was one of the "terrors" of the town, if he was made marshal the rest of the bad characters would be apt to stand in awe of him and behave themselves.

And the man got along pretty well, excepting that he was apt to go on a spree now and then, when he was likely to make it lively for the "boys," but as he didn't trouble the quiet, respectable citizens no particular notice was taken of these little freaks.

When the Silver Sport was delivered into the hands of the marshal by the sheriff with strict injunction to take good care that he did not escape, Coburn surveyed the prisoner with a deal of curiosity.

"You are the Silver Sport, hey?"

"My name is Highland Wylde, but I believe I am called the Silver Sport once in a while."

"And are you the man who got away with the Birmingham Infant?"

And from the tone in which the marshal spoke it was evident that he was very much inclined to believe that there must be something wrong about the statement.

"Well, London Bill paid me the money, so I suppose he thought I got away with the boxer."

"The Birmingham Infant must have been drunk or else you could never have handled him," Coburn declared, bluntly.

"Maybe he was," Highland Wylde responded, placidly.

"The liquor we get nowadays acts so durned queerly on a man, that it is often a mighty hard matter to tell whether a man is drunk or sober."

"I reckon I could get away with you myself," the marshal observed, measuring his prisoner with his eye as he spoke.

"Maybe you could, but you will never find out until you try, and, situated as I am, I don't see much chance of deciding the matter just at present."

"Thar's an elegant little bit of ground right out in the back of the smoke-house hyer—nice and quiet, and out of the way, where no one will be apt to notice what is going on," Coburn observed, in a thoughtful sort of way.

"Say, I reckon you won't be tried until tomorrow afternoon from what I heard the sheriff give out, so s'pose I get a few of the boys together to-morrow morning and we take a go at each other, jest fer greens?"

Now our hero was not a man who went out of his way to seek a quarrel, but it really seemed to him that this burly marshal deserved a lesson, and he hadn't any doubt in regard to his ability to give him one.

So he informed the official that the programme which he had just suggested would suit him as if he had "been made for it."

"I'm sorry for you, you gay sport, but I reckon I will have to hammer you so that the best friend you have in the camp won't know you arter I git through with the operation," the marshal remarked, as he prepared to depart.

"Let me see," quoth the Silver Sport, in a reflective sort of way.

"If I lay you out it will be the twelfth marshal that I have killed since I struck Arizona, and I suppose you will do just as well to make up the round dozen as any town marshal I can run across anywhere."

The bully gave utterance to a few good round oaths, and then withdrew in disgust.

Great was the excitement in the camp when it awoke next morning and learned what had transpired during the night.

"And, strange to say, despite the fact that both the sheriff and the landlord considered that the proof against the Silver Sport was so strong that there was hardly a doubt in regard to his being the disguised road-agent, public opinion didn't run that way."

It was the general impression that there was some mistake about the matter.

The sheriff was a stranger, and so his opinion had little weight in Crested Hill, and the landlord of the Old Kentucky Home was not a popular man.

"As mean as old Somerset," was a common saying, and a great many of the citizens said

openly that it served him right to be "skinned" once in a while.

And while the excitement was at its height, Parson John made his appearance and related how he had been stopped on the trail just beyond the camp, about eleven o'clock on the previous evening, and robbed of some fifty dollars.

And when he was conducted to the smoke-house he positively identified the Silver Sport as being the man who had "stood him up" in so expert a manner.

Captain Colorado strolled into the town, too, early in the morning, listened to the conversation, and then contrived to get speech with the sheriff.

"I'm an old detective," he remarked.

"Used to be considered a pretty good man in my line in New York until the climate got too severe for me and I came West for my health."

Kellerhan put his tongue in his cheek at this statement, for men who have been obliged to leave the *effete* East on account of their health are numerous in the Far West.

Quite a number undoubtedly would have choked to death if they had not sought a change of air.

"I reckon if this galoot has got a hiding-place in his room I can find it."

Kellerhan gladly accepted the aid of the captain.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE MARSHAL TRIES IT ON.

CONTRARY to general expectation the trial was arranged to take place in the afternoon instead of in the morning.

This was the sheriff's idea, for he hoped to be able to secure some important evidence.

Kellerhan had consulted the mayor of the town—Ben Haight, Long Ben Haight, as he was usually termed on account of his unusual height—in regard to this matter, and that worthy, although expressing the strongest doubt as to the guilt of the accused, had told the sheriff to go ahead and take his own time.

Haight was the principal storekeeper of the town.

He had a room fitted up in the back part of his store for a sleeping-apartment, a common thing in the new towns of the West, so the proprietor can be on hand to protect his goods at all times, yet he took his meals at the hotel and so had had the opportunity to make the acquaintance of the Silver Sport.

He had taken a liking to the stranger, and now that the clouds of trouble had come thick about his head was inclined to do all he could for him.

In his official capacity of mayor of the town Haight had visited Highland Wylde in the smoke-house and expressed his concern that the young man should be so unfortunate as to get into such a scrape.

Perceiving that the mayor was inclined to see that he had full measure of justice, the Silver Sport was encouraged to make known to him his ideas in regard to the matter.

The mayor listened attentively; he was a clear-headed business-man, and as he was inclined to believe the young man was not guilty, his theory of the affair made a decided impression.

"You shall have a fair trial," he said, at the close of the interview.

"You can depend upon that, and I will do all I can to get at the truth of the matter."

"It seems to me as if you had hit upon the right idea, and I will try and look into it all I can."

In this emergency the two young men who had befriended the Silver Sport when he had made his first appearance in the town, Ray Thibodeaux and Gil Ellsworth, did yeoman service in his behalf.

They scouted the idea of his guilt.

Even the two bummers of the camp, Slim Jim and Old Man Johnny Boker "wouldn't have it," to use the current slang.

As Old Man Boker graphically remarked:

"Wot? a cove who kin play poker as well as he kin—who kin knock out any man in the town in a squar' fight, go for to turn road-agent? Oh, wot are you giving us?"

Even the fistic element of the camp, which centered about London Bill's saloon, regarded the accusation as being ridiculous.

"Oh, the sheriff is too fresh!" was the general declaration. "He wants to make himself solid with the town, and as he knows he can't catch the right man, he reckons he can pitch onto the Silver Sport and make him fill the bill!"

So the host of the London Arms declared, and all the frequenters of the place agreed with the ex-pugilist.

The town marshal meanwhile had begun one of his regular sprees, and one of the first places he stopped into after he got going was London Bill's saloon.

He took London Bill to one side and consulted him in regard to the physical prowess of the young sport.

"They tell me that he knocked out two of your best men," he said, "but I don't take any stock in any sich yarn. I wasn't in the town

when it happened, and so I thought I would come and see you, so as to get at the rights of the matter."

London Bill assured him that it was a "sure-enough" fact.

"The blarsted sport collared the money that I 'ad hup, you know," he explained. "Hand 'e couldn't ave done that, don't you see, if 'e 'adn't knocked my men hout in a fair and square manner."

Then, to the astonishment of London Bill, the marshal gravely announced that he was sure there was some beastly trick about the thing, and he had made up his mind that a man about his size could give the stranger sport a good thumping.

"Oh, but you're not a boxer, yer know!" the Englishman exclaimed.

"The blazes I ain't!" cried the marshal, just enough under the influence of liquor to be inclined to resent any aspersion of this kind.

"Well, I mean that I never 'eard, you know, that you could do hanythink of the kind," replied the host, with the idea of mollifying the official, for he knew from experience that the marshal was an ugly man when he got his temper up, and he was anxious to avoid trouble.

"I'm going to knock him out, and I'm going to do it, too, inside of an hour," Coburn declared, much to the astonishment of the other, and he wound up by inviting London Bill to come down and witness the contest.

"Hall right, of course, bif you say so," the Englishman remarked; and in his sleeve he chuckled, for it was his opinion that inside of five minutes after the marshal encountered the Silver Sport, he would wake to the consciousness that he had never made a bigger mistake in all his life.

The marshal was in that condition, though, when it was useless to attempt to talk to him, for any opposition provoked his anger.

So the host of the London Arms said he would be delighted to make one of the party.

"Come right along with me, then!" exclaimed Coburn, who had his mind so set on this fancy that he could brook no delay.

Off the two set for the smoke-house.

But on the way the marshal stopped in so many places, chiefly saloons, and invited such a number of the boys to come down and see him "clean out" the Silver Sport, that by the time the jail was reached there was a small army at the marshal's heels.

Coburn, who by this time was pretty well under the influence of the liquor which he had drank, had selected three of his friends who possessed repeating-rifles, and set them the task of preventing the prisoner from escaping, in case he should make up his mind after coming into the open air to try a bold dash for liberty.

When Coburn entered the smoke-house and invited the Silver Sport to walk out and get hammered, Highland Wylde laughed at the idea.

"Why, man, you are in no condition for a boxing match!" the Silver Sport exclaimed.

"You are so drunk now that you can hardly stand on your legs."

"Drunk or sober I'm a match for you any day in the week!" Coburn retorted, indignantly.

"You have got to come out and fight; do you understand that?"

"I'm the man who is going to clinch you for all you are worth! I want to show this hyer camp that as a fighter you are no good!"

"Oh well, have it your own way," the Silver Sport replied, finding that the man was determined upon war.

"You might as well accommodate the marshal, seeing as 'ow 'e is 'ot for hit," London Bill remarked, he having accompanied the official at his request into the smoke-house.

"All right; I'm agreeable."

Then the three quitted the jail.

As the marshal had said, the spot of ground in the rear of the smoke-house was well-fitted for a pugilistic encounter, being level and retired from observation, although, thanks to the pains which the official had taken to inform all his friends of how he intended to "knock out" the Silver Sport, about one-half of the men in the town were on the ground.

London Bill agreed to act as master of ceremonies, and when the bystanders formed a ring he called upon the contestants to appear.

Both had stripped off their coats—neither wore a vest—cast aside their hats, and when the Englishman called "time!" the two confronted each other, shook hands after the time-honored fashion, and then stepped back and "put up their hands."

The two men were pretty evenly matched, although the marshal was the bigger man of the pair, but he was a clumsily-built fellow, with big bones, loosely put together, as the saying is, and he was awkwardness itself compared with lithe and graceful Highland Wylde.

A moment the men sparred, then the Silver Sport made a feint at the head of the official, and up went the big arms of Coburn to guard his face, and Highland Wylde, like the skillful boxer that he was, improved the opportunity to deliver a terrific right-bander which, alighting on the body of the marshal, seemed to fairly make his ribs crack.

Maddened by the pain of the stroke, Coburn cast aside all idea of sparring and rushed in to close with his antagonist in a bear-like hug.

Two terrible blows he received as he rushed in, but he would not be denied and grappled with the Silver Sport in blind fury.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE TRIAL.

A MOMENT the antagonists were locked in each other's grip, swaying to and fro like two huge serpents, and then, in some peculiar way—just exactly how it was done few of the bystanders could determine—the Silver Sport got a twist on his antagonist and threw him with such tremendous force that Coburn was stunned by the shock.

It was fully five minutes before the marshal recovered his senses, and then he sat up and looked around him in a bewildered way.

For the moment he was dazed, and did not exactly comprehend what had happened to him.

Then his eyes fell upon the figure of the Silver Sport, who was standing with his muscular arms folded across his breast waiting for his opponent to come to time.

The marshal rose slowly to his feet, and the lookers-on, who were surveying the scene with eager interest, noticed with astonishment that the shock of the fall had apparently sobered him, for he did not betray in his bearing the slightest trace of liquor now.

"Say! what in thunder were you trying to do? Did you want to break every bone in my body?" he exclaimed, addressing Highland Wylde, and looking at him in an inquiring sort of way, just as a man would be apt to inspect some curious monstrosity which he had suddenly come across.

"Time!" yelled the Englishman, eager for more "fun."

"Hyar, some one of you lend me a pistol so I can kill this infernal fool of an Englishman!" the marshal cried.

"Wot hin blazes do you mean?" growled London Bill, indignantly.

"Didn't you ax me for to hact as master of ceremonies in this 'ere scrapping-match?"

"Oh, yes, but I've got all I want, and I say, boys, if any one of you ever catches me engaged in a boxing-match again, I give you leave to shoot me on the spot."

"You're a good man, Mister Silver Sport," he continued, addressing Highland Wylde.

"As good a man as thar is in this hyer camp, I reckon, but you ain't so big a donkey as I am, by a long shot."

"Boys, the picnic is over," he continued, turning to the crowd.

"Now I'll tell you what I'll do; jest keep this quiet and I'll stand the drinks fer the hull on ye, but I give you fair warning that if any of you galoots thinks it will be funny in the future to ax me if I know anything about boxing or wrestling, I'll kill the man on the spot."

The bystanders laughed and the crowd dispersed, Highland Wylde returning to his former quarters in the smoke-house.

For once in the history of the camp of Crested Hill one of its marshal's sprees had been unceremoniously stopped right in the beginning, so the gossips of the town had plenty to talk about until the trial of the supposed road-agent began in the afternoon.

On account of the general interest in the matter, the mayor decided to hold the examination in the open air, as almost everybody in the camp wanted to witness the proceedings, and there wasn't a building in the town which could be used for the purpose large enough to accommodate the audience anxious to be present.

This course gave general satisfaction.

The open space in front of the hotel was selected as the place to hold the court.

Chairs were provided for the mayor, the prisoner and the sheriff, and also one for the accommodation of the witnesses, as they were singly called upon.

Before commencing proceedings, the mayor asked the prisoner if he shouldn't assign some one as counsel to defend him.

The Silver Sport replied in the negative, saying that he "reckoned," although he wasn't any lawyer, that he could look out for his own interests.

A circle of armed men with rifles and revolvers were stationed so as to keep back the crowd and prevent any obtrusive individual from getting in the way.

Of course this was a sort of free-and-easy court, but in the wilds of the West "everything goes."

The mayor commenced the proceedings.

"Highland Wylde, otherwise known as the Silver Sport, you are accused of being the masked road-agent who has lately played the mischief with the personal property of some of our citizens."

"What have you to say to this charge—are you guilty or not guilty?"

"Not guilty, your Honor," replied the Silver Sport, firmly.

"Sheriff, you will take charge of the prosecution, I suppose?" the mayor remarked.

"Yes, your Honor," replied Kellerhan, getting on his legs.

"Produce your witnesses, then."

The first one to come forward was the veteran foreman of the Red Elephant works, Jimmy McMillen.

He testified in regard to his adventure with the masked road-agent on the river trail.

But in answer to the mayor's questions he said he could not positively swear that it was the Silver Sport who had played the part of the footpad, although it was a man about his size, and he fancied the voice was a familiar one, although the road-agent tried to disguise his natural tones; the robber, too, displayed a nickel-plated revolver such as the prisoner was known to carry.

And then, in reply to some skillfully-put questions from the sheriff, McMillen told how he had played poker on the night in question with the prisoner—had won largely, and so the Silver Sport knew full well that he was carrying a large sum of money home with him.

The prisoner contented himself with only asking a few questions, and the information gained was that there was a window in the room which the poker-party had occupied, and the curtain was partly up so that any one on the outside of the house could easily have ascertained who was the greatest gainer by the game, and that it was not until McMillen had come to town and talked the matter over with the sheriff and the landlord of the hotel, and incidentally it had been mentioned that the Silver Sport had nickel-plated revolvers, that his suspicions were roused in regard to Highland Wylde being the road-agent.

The last question put was:

"Would you be willing to swear to the best of your knowledge and belief that I am the man who robbed you on the trail?"

"No, I would not—I couldn't swear to it, and I think there is some mistake about the matter, for now that I hear your voice in the open air it don't seem possible to me that you could have been the man who robbed me, and if it hadn't been for the nickel-plated revolver business I should never have suspected you," the veteran replied, honestly.

"I reckon, though, that the prisoner has got the only pair of nickel-plated revolvers that thar are in the town," the sheriff observed, significantly.

"Hold on, sheriff," warned the mayor. "You ain't put in any proof of that yet, and it ain't quite the squar' thing to make any such statement unless you are prepared to back it up, and, mebbe, you will not find that an easy thing to do."

A hum of approval arose on the air.

There isn't anything in this life that the average American crowd appreciates so much as justice—even-handed justice.

The next witness was Parson John.

He testified that he had been stopped and robbed as he was coming into the town, and he swore positively that the Silver Sport was the man who did the deed.

And in answer to questions from the prisoner he said that he identified him by means of his figure, voice, eyes, and through a hole in the hood, which served for a disguise, he saw the color of the road-agent's hair.

All were staggered by this straightforward testimony.

Then, in answer to questions from the sheriff, Parson John related how his small store of wealth had been contained in an old-fashioned leather wallet and that he would be able to identify the wallet anywhere, for on the inside of the flap his name was written, John Graham.

The next to appear was the landlord, and he, too, was positive in swearing that the prisoner was the man who played road-agent; he, too, had seen the lock of hair through the hole in the hood, and he also related how he had gone with the sheriff to the room of Highland Wylde, made him a prisoner, and discovered the *poncho* and hood concealed in the bed.

All that the Silver Sport seemed to desire to establish in his cross-examination of Somerset was that if it had been possible for the nocturnal marauder to set at naught the lock and bolt which guarded the landlord's door, the more common lock which protected his portal would not have been any obstacle to such an expert rascal gaining an easy access to his apartment.

The next witness was a surprise to the assemblage, for it was the Red Elephant owner, Alexander Murray.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

AN UNEXPECTED WITNESS.

Murray looked pale and weak, and it was apparent to all that the man had suffered severely.

That he had had an affray with the Silver Sport was generally known, but that he was prepared to testify anything in regard to the road-agent business was a surprise to all the bystanders.

And the surprise was increased when Murray related how he had been waylaid by the disguised road-agent—and his description of the

man who had waylaid him answered exactly to that of the outlaw who had operated on the others.

When he had finished his testimony, Highland Wylde said that he had no questions to put.

Murray's appearance as a witness had been a surprise, but when he withdrew and his new-made wife, the dashing Oriana, took his place the astonishment of the crowd was great.

Eager was the interest with which her statement was received, and the story she told astounded all the hearers, for she told the tale of how she and the Silver Sport had plotted together to wrest the Red Elephant Mine from the control of Murray.

But in telling the story she departed somewhat from the truth, for she represented that it was Highland Wylde who had sought her out and suggested the scheme of vengeance to her, and how, smarting under the death of her brother, she had consented to the plan, but after embarking upon it had suddenly become aware that it was not right and abruptly stopped.

"No questions to ask the lady, only a plain, straightforward story to tell," the Silver Sport remarked, after the lady had finished.

And then he told the true tale of how he had been induced to go into the fight for the Red Elephant property, but had hesitated and refused to act longer when he discovered that nothing short of the death of Murray would satisfy the vengeful soul of the savage woman.

And in conclusion he said, with a sarcasm that went straight home:

"As she couldn't get me to kill the man she concluded to marry him, being bound to get square with him in some way."

"It is a vile falsehood—the story is all a lie!" Oriana declared, her cheeks flaming red with rage.

"I haven't any excuse to offer for my part in the transaction except the old one that Father Adam gave, 'the woman tempted me and I ate!'"

Despite the fact that on the border in a case of this kind the sympathy of the crowd is, nine times out of ten, in favor of the woman, yet in this instance, there were few of the bystanders who did not believe that the story of the Silver Sport was the true one.

The uncalled-for attack that the Red Elephant man had made upon the stranger sport had been a mystery to the camp, but now it was explained.

The next witness was as great a surprise as the two previous ones had been, for it was Captain Bill Colorado.

No one supposed he knew anything about the case, but as the sheriff had said that this was the last witness he should present, the reserving of him for the last seemed to indicate that his testimony would be important.

And it was, and all the hearers listened with the most intense eagerness.

The captain went at it in a matter-of-fact professional way.

He explained that he had been a detective in the East and having his attention attracted to this case thought he saw a chance to put in some good work.

In company with the sheriff he had visited the apartment in the hotel which was occupied by the Silver Sport, and had thoroughly searched the room, and his skill in the detective line had enabled him to discover a secret hiding-place, which the sheriff and landlord had overlooked.

Under the head of the bed next to the wall a small section of the flooring had been loosened from its fastenings—a single piece of a board about three feet long.

And in the cavity, under the board, was discovered the canvas-bag which had held Landlord Somerset's money, and the wallet, with Parson John's name inscribed on the flap, but there wasn't any sign of the cash which the articles contained when they were wrested from their owners' possession.

This looked like convincing proof, although every one wondered what on earth the sharp had done with the money.

But the Silver Sport appeared to be the least concerned man in the assemblage, yet at the same time he fully realized how skillfully prepared was the trap into which he had fallen, and he guessed that it was to the revengeful woman he owed it all.

He believed he understood the scheme now in all its details.

This fellow—this Captain Bill Colorado as he called himself—was the man who had engineered the job.

It was he who had taken upon himself the role of road-agent, adopting the self-same disguise which had been worn by himself when he entrapped Alexander Murray, so that all would think the second road-agent was the same as the first.

But the bystanders, of course, knew nothing of this, and when the captain finished his testimony it was the general opinion that the case looked bad for Highland Wylde.

"What have you got to say to this?" the mayor asked after the captain had finished.

"Not much, your Honor, except to quote the

old saying, that 'He who hides can easily find,' and to call your attention to the fact that it is a mighty queer thing for a criminal to hide away worthless articles like this bag and wallet, and that no trace of the cash had been discovered."

"If Somerset's and the sheriff's story is correct and I am the criminal, there wasn't time for me to get rid of the money except to put it somewhere in that room, and I judge the examination that has been made of the apartment was so searching that no possible hiding-place has escaped."

"Don't you see the trick?"

"The real road-agent got away with the plunder, and by means of false keys stuck these things in my room in these clumsily-contrived hiding-places, so as to throw suspicion upon me."

The mayor shook his head in a dubious manner; he was sorely puzzled, and did not know what to make of the matter.

Just then there was a commotion in the crowd and the blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl, Patience, forced her way into the open circle.

"Let me pass!" she cried, "so that justice may be done to an innocent man!"

She addressed her conversation to the mayor, conjecturing that he was the presiding officer.

The conspirators looked alarmed, for all of the plotters anticipated that in some unforeseen way the girl was going to upset their plans.

"This is all a dreadful plot, your Honor," she continued almost breathlessly, for when at a distance she saw the trial was going on, she had hurried at the top of her speed so as to arrive in time.

"This man is the guilty one—he is the road-agent!" and she leveled the accusation at the amazed Captain Colorado.

"I am the daughter of one of his partners in crime, Edmund Carson, known as Gray Ed."

"My father, being stricken unto death by a sudden stroke, made a confession at the last moment."

"This woman arranged the details of the plan"—and she indicated Oriana, who was white with rage. "And this band of villains, to which my father belonged, carried it out."

"My father was not fully in the secret, but this scoundrel here, Parson John, was, and he revealed the truth to my father."

Captain Colorado cast a furious glance at the unlucky Parson John, who had been overcome with liquor when he committed the indiscretion.

Rough hands were laid upon the captain and his pard.

On Colorado's person was found a nickel-plated revolver and a goodly share of the money which had been taken, also a fine kit of delicate burglar's tools.

Away to the jail the pair were dragged, while Murray was immediately warned that he and his wife must leave the camp, never to return.

Willingly they agreed to this, glad to escape with their lives.

That night the jail was stormed by a mob, and Judge Lynch executed speedy vengeance upon the two pards.

The parson was hanged, howling for mercy, while Captain Colorado fought like a tiger and was game to the last.

Our tale is told.

The Silver Sport in due time became the husband of the lion-hearted maid to whom he had twice owed his deliverance from a peril which threatened his life.

He became interested in a mine, and to this day the camp of Crested Hill in the Arizonian wilds can boast no better citizen than our hero with the light locks, Highland Wylde, the Silver Sport.

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679 Revello, the Pirate Cruiser; or, The Rival Rovers.
672 The Red Rapiet; or, The Sea Rover's Bride.
662 The Jew Detective; or, The Beautiful Convict.
658 The Cowboy Clan; or, The Tigress of Texas.
653 Lasso King's League; or, Buck Taylor in Texas.
640 The Rover's Retribution.
635 The Ex-Buccaneer; or, The Stigma of Sin.
630 The Sea Thief.
625 Red Wings; or, The Gold Seekers of the Bahamas.
615 The Three Buccaneers.
610 The Red Flag Rover; or, White Wings of the Deep.
605 The Shadow Silver Ship.
600 The Silver Ship; or, The Sea Scouts of '76.
593 The Sea Rebel; or, Red Rovers of the Revolution.
597 Conrad, the Sailor Spy; or, True Hearts of '76.
581 The Outlawed Skipper; or, The Gantlet Runner.
560 The Man from Mexico.
553 Mark Monte, the Mutineer; or, The Branded Brig.
546 The Doomed Whaler; or, The Life Wreck.
540 The Fleet Scourge; or, The Sea Wings of Salem.
530 The Savages of the Sea.
524 The Sea Chaser; or, The Pirate Noble.
516 Chatard, the Dead-Shot Duelist.
510 El Moro, the Corsair Commodore.
493 The Scouts of the Sea.
489 The Pirate Hunter; or, The Ocean Rivals.
482 Ocean Tramps; or, The Desperadoes of the Deep.
476 Bob Brent, the Buccaneer; or, the Red Sea Raider.
469 The Lieutenant Detective; or, the Fugitive Sailor.
457 The Sea Insurgent; or, The Conspirator Son.
446 Ocean Ogre, the Outcast Corsair.
435 The One-Armed Buccaneer.
430 The Fatal Frigate; or, Rivals in Love and War.
425 The Sea Sword; or, The Ocean Rivals.
418 The Sea Siren; or, The Fugitive Privateer.
399 The New Monte Cristo.
393 The Convict Captain.
388 The Giant Buccaneer; or, The Wrecker Witch.
377 Afloat and Ashore; or, The Corsair Conspirator.
373 Sailor of Fortune; or, The Barnegat Buccaneer.
369 The Coast Corsair; or, The Siren of the Sea.
364 The Sea Fugitive; or, The Queen of the Coast.
346 Ocean Guerrillas; or, Phantom Midshipman.
341 The Sea Desperado.
336 The Magic Snip; or, Sandy Hook Freebooters.
325 The Gentleman Pirate; or, The Casco Hermits.
318 The Indian Buccaneer; or, The Red Rovers.
307 The Phantom Pirate; or, The Water Wolves.
281 The Sea Owl; or, The Lady Captain of the Gulf.
259 Outlass and Cross; or, the Ghouls of the Sea.
255 The Pirate Priest; or, The Gambler's Daughter.
246 Queen Helen, the Amazon of the Overland.
235 Red Lightning the Man of Chance.
231 The Kid Glove Miner; or, The Magic Doctor.
224 Black Beard, the Buccaneer.
220 The Specter Yacht; or, A Brother's Crime.
216 The Corsair Planter; or, Driven to Doom.
210 Buccaneer Bess, the Lioness of the Sea.
205 The Gambler Pirate; or, Lady of the Lagoon.
198 The Skeleton Schooner; or, The Skimmer.
184 The Ocean Vampire; or, The Castle Heiress.
181 The Scarlet Schooner; or, The Sea Nemesis.
177 Don Diablo, the Planter-Corsair.
172 Black Pirate; or, The Golden Fetters Mystery.
162 The Mad Mariner; or, Dishonored and Disowned.
155 The Corsair Queen; or, The Gypsies of the Sea.
147 Gold Spur, the Gentleman from Texas.
139 Fire Eye; or, The Bride of a Buccaneer.
134 Darkey Dan, the Colored Detective.
131 Buckskin Sam, the Texas Trail.
128 The Chevalier Corsair; or, The Heritage.
121 The Sea Cadet; or, The Rover of the Rigoletts.
116 Black Plume; or, The Sorceress of Hell Gate.
109 Captain Kyd, the King of the Black Flag.
104 Montezuma, the Merciless.
103 Merle, the Mutineer; or, The Red Anchor Brand.
94 Freelance, the Buccaneer.
89 The Pirate Prince; or, The Queen of the Isle.
85 The Cretan Rover; or, Zuleikah the Beautiful.
2 The Dare Devil; or, The Winged Sea Witch.

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By Colonel Prentiss Ingraham.

- 765 Buffalo Bill's Dozen; or, Silk Ribbon Sam.
761 Buffalo Bill's Mascot.
757 Buffalo Bill's Double.
750 Buffalo Bill's Big Four.
743 Buffalo Bill's Flush Hand.
739 Buffalo Bill's Blind; or, The Masked Driver.
735 Buffalo Bill and His Merry Men.
731 Buffalo Bill's Beagles; or, Silk Lasso Sam.
727 Buffalo Bill's Body Guard.
722 Buffalo Bill on the War-path.
716 Buffalo Bill's Scout Shadowers.
710 Buffalo Bill Baffled; or, The Deserter Desperado.
697 Buffalo Bill's Buckskin Brotherhood.
691 Buffalo Bill's Blind Trail; or, Mustang Madge.
667 Buffalo Bill's Swoop; or, The King of the Mines.
649 Buffalo Bill's Chief of Cowboys; or, Buck Taylor.
644 Buffalo Bill's Bonanza; or, Silver Circle Knights.
632 Buffalo Bill's Grip; or, Oath Bound to Ouster.
629 Buffalo Bill's Pledge; or, The League of Three.
189 Wild Bill's Gold Trail; or, The Desperate Dozen.
175 Wild Bill's Trump Card; or, The Indian Heiress.
168 Wild Bill, the Pistol Dead Shot.

By Buffalo Bill.

- 689 Buffalo Bill's Gold King.
599 The Dead Shot Nine; or, My Pard of the Plains.
414 Red Renard, the Indian Detective.
401 One-Armed Pard; or, Borderland Retribution.
397 The Wizard Brothers; or, White Beaver's Trail.
394 White Beaver, the Exile of the Platte.
319 Wild Bill, the Whirlwind of the West.
304 Texas Jack, the Prairie Rattler.
243 The Pilgrim Sharp; or, The Soldier's Sweetheart.
83 Gold Bullet Sport; or, Knights of the Overland.
53 Death-Tracker, the Chief of Scouts.

By Leon Lewis, Ned Buntline, etc.

- 682 Buffalo Bill's Secret Service Trail.
629 Buffalo Bill's Daring Role; or, Daredeath Dick.
517 Buffalo Bill's First Trail; or, The Express Rider.
159 Buffalo Bill, Chief of Scouts.
117 Buffalo Bill Strange Pard; or, Dashing Dandy.
92 Buffalo Bill, the Buckskin King.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.

- 754 The Man from Texas; or, Dangerfield, the Doctor Detective.
744 Sweepstakes Sam, the Silver Sport.
720 The Secret Six; or, Old Halcyon.
712 The Man of Silk.
705 Bantam Bob, the Beauty from Butte.
698 Kent Kasson, the Preacher Sport.
683 Bob Breeze, the Rounder Detective.
675 Steel Surry, the Sport from Sunrise.
668 Solemn Saul's Luck Streak.
661 The Get-There Sharp.
651 Silvertip Steve, the Sky Scraper from Siskiyou.
645 Gopher Gabe, the Unseen Detective.
636 Dandy Darling, Detective.
627 Mossback Mose, the Mountaineer.
617 The Grip Sack Sharp's Even up.
597 Big Bandy, the Brigadier of Brimstone Butte.
588 Sandy Sands, the Sharp from Snap City.
576 Silver-Tongued Sid; or, Grip Sack Sharp's Sweep.
564 The Grip-Sack Sharp; or, The Seraphs of Sodom.
555 Grip-Sack Sid, the Sample Sport.
547 The Buried Detective; or, Saul's Six Sensations.
541 Major Magnet, the Man of Nerve.
535 Dandy Dutch, the Decorator from Dead-Lift.
527 Dandy Andy, the Diamond Detective.
514 Gabe Gunn, the Grizzly from Ginseng.
504 Solemn Saul, the Sad Man from San Saba.
495 Rattlepate Rob; or, The Roundhead's Reprisal.
488 The Thoroughbred Sport.
474 Daddy Dead-Eye, the Despot of Dew Drop.
466 Old Rough and Ready, the Sage of Sundown.
458 Dutch Dan, the Pilgrim from Spitzenberg.
450 The Rustler Detective.
443 A Cool Hand; or, Pistol Johnny's Picnic.
438 Oklahoma Nick.
433 Laughing Leo; or, Sam's Dandy Pard.
426 The Ghost Detective; or, The Secret Service Spy.
416 Monte Jim, the Black Sheep of Bismarck.
409 Rob Roy Ranch; or, The Imps of Pan Handle.
403 The Nameless Sport.
395 Deadly Aim, the Duke of Derringers.
387 Dark Durg, the Ishmael of the Hills.
379 Howling Jonathan, the Terror from Headwaters.
372 Captain Crisp, the Man with a Record.
367 A Royal Flush; or, Dan Brown's Big Game.
360 Jumping Jerry, the Gamecock from Sundown.
353 Stormy Steve, the Mad Athlete.
351 Nor' West Nick, the Border Detective.
345 Masked Mark, the Mounted Detective.
339 Spread Eagle Sam, the Hercules Hide Hunter.
331 Chispa Charley, the Gold Nugget Sport.
324 Old Forked Lightning, the Solitary.
317 Frank Lightfoot, the Miner Detective.
303 Faro Saul, the Handsome Hercules.
292 Moke Horner, the Boss Roustabout.
286 Pistol Johnny; or, One Man in a Thousand.
283 Sleek Sam, the Devil of the Mines.
257 Death Trap Diggings; or, A Man 'Way Back.
249 Elephant Tom, of Durango.
241 Spitfire Saul, King of the Rustlers.
233 The Old Boy of Tombstone.
201 Pirate of the Placers; or, Joaquin's Death Hunt.
197 Revolver Rob; or, The Belle of Nugget Camp.
180 Old '49; or, The Amazon of Arizona.
170 Sweet William, the Trapper Detective.
163 Joaquin, the Terrible.
154 Joaquin, the Saddle King.
141 Equinox Tom, the Bully of Red Rock.
127 Sol Scott, the Masked Miner.
119 Alabama Joe; or, The Yazoo Man-Hunters.
105 Dan Brown of Denver; or, The Detective.
88 Big George; or, The Five Outlaw Brothers.
71 Captain Cool Blade; or, Mississippi Man Shark.
67 The Boy Jockey; or, Honesty vs. Crookedness.
64 Double-Sight, the Death Shot.
50 Jack Rabbit, the Prairie Sport.
47 Pacific Pete, the Prince of the Revolver.
45 Old Bull's-Eye, the Lightning Shot.
40 Long-Haired Pards; or, The Tartars of the Plains.
30 Gospel George; or, Flery Fred, the Outlaw.
23 Three-Fingered Jack, the Road-Agent.

BY J. C. COWDRICK.

- 752 The Suspect Sport of Daisy Drift.
626 Ducats Dion, the Nabob Sport Detective.
612 Sheriff Stillwood, the Regulator of Raspberry.
598 The Dominie Detective.
591 Duke Daniels, the Society Detective.
580 Shadowing a Shadow.
565 Prince Paul, the Postman Detective.
557 The Mountain Graybeards; or, Riddles' Riddle.
519 Old Riddles, the Rocky Ranger.
499 Twilight Charlie, the Road Sport.
472 Gilbert of Gotham, the Steel-arm Detective.
452 Rainbow Rob, the Tulp from Texas.
436 Kentucky Jean, the Sport from Yellow Pine.
422 Blue Grass Burt, the Gold Star Detective.
390 The Giant Cupid; or, Cibuta John's Jubilee.

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- 758 The Wizard King Detective.
723 Teamster Tom, the Boomer Detective.
709 Lodestone Lem, the Champion of Chestnut Burr.
695 Singer Sam, the Pilgrim Detective.
688 River Rustlers; or, the Detective from 'Way Back.
673 Stuttering Sam, the Whitest Sport of Santa Fe.
666 Old Adamant, the Man of Rock.
618 Kansas Karl, the Detective King.
552 Prince Primrose, the Flower of the Flock.
528 Huckleberry, the Foot-Hills Detective.

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- 742 Detective Burr Among the New York Thugs.
734 Detective Burr's Foil; or, A Woman's Strategy.
728 Detective Burr, the Headquarters Special.
713 Detective Burr's Spirit Chase.
706 Detective Burr's Seven Clues.
698 Thad Burr, the Invincible; or, The "L" Clue.
690 The Matchless Detective.
680 XX, the Fatal Claw; or, Burr's Master Case.

BY MAJOR DANGERFIELD BURR.

- 448 Hark Kenton, the Traitor.
185 The Phantom Mazeppa; or, The Hyena.
156 Velvet Face, the Border Bravo.
142 Captain Crimson, the Man of the Iron Face.
117 Buffalo Bill's Strange Pard; or, Dashing Dandy.

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- 741 Dick Talbot's Close Call.
737 Dick Talbot in Apache Land.
733 Dick Talbot, the Ranch King.
729 Dick Talbot's Clean-Out.
725 Dick Talbot in No Man's Camp.
384 Dick Talbot in the Rockies; or, Injun Dick.
354 Dick Talbot; or, The Brand of Crimson Cross.
349 Dick, the Gentleman Road-Agent.
107 Dick Talbot, of Cinnabar.
93 Dick Talbot, King of the Road.
41 Dick Talbot in Utah; or, Gold Dan.
38 Dick Talbot's Iron Grip; or, The Velvet Hand.
36 Dick Talbot; or, The Death-Shot of Shasta.
35 Dick Talbot at the Mines; or, Kentucky, the Sport.
34 Dick Talbot's Foe; or, Rocky Mountain Rob.
33 Dick Talbot at White Pine; or, Overland Kit.

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- 660 The Fresh in Montana; or, Blake's Full Hand.
652 The Fresh's Rustle at Painted City.
647 The Fresh at Santa Fe; or, The Stranger Sharp.
556 Fresh, the Sport; or, The Big Racket at Slide Out.
537 Fresh Against the Field; or, Blake, the Lion.
529 The Fresh of Frisco in New York.
497 The Fresh in Texas; or, The Escobedo Million.
461 The Fresh of Frisco on the Rio Grande.
173 The Fresh in Arizona; or, California John.
130 The Fresh in Mexico; or, Captain Volcano.
97 The Fresh in Big Walnut Camp; or, Bronze Jack.
77 The Fresh of Frisco.

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- 749 Joe Phenix's Big Bulge.
745 Joe Phenix's Mad Case.
708 Joe Phenix's Siren; or, The Woman Hawkshaw.
700 Joe Phenix's Unknown; or, Crushing the Crooks.
681 Joe Phenix's Specials; or, The Actress Detective.
637 Joe Phenix in Crazy Camp.
632 Joe Phenix's Master Search.
628 Joe Phenix's Combin'; or, the Dandy Conspirator.
620 Joe Phenix's Silent Six.
601 Joe Phenix's Shadow; or, the Detective's Monitor.
419 Joe Phenix, the King of Detectives.
391 Joe Phenix's Still Hunt.
161 Joe Phenix's Great Man Hunt.
112 Joe Phenix, Private Detective; or, The League.
79 Joe Phenix, the Police Spy.

Aiken's Miscellaneous Novels.

- 753 Gideon's Grip at Babylon Bar.
717 Captain Pat McGowen, the Greencoat Detective.
674 Uncle Sun Up, the Born Detective.
670 The Lightweight Detective.
665 The Frisco Detective; or, The Golden Gate Find.
613 Keen Billy, the Sport.
607 Old Benzine, the "Hard Case" Detective.
594 Fire Face, the Silver King's Foe.
586 The Silver Sharp Detective.
577 Tom, of California; or, Detective's Shadow Act.
570 The Actress Detective; or, The Invisible Hand.
562 Lone Hand, the Shadow.
520 The Lone Hand on the Caddo.
490 The Lone Hand in Texas.
475 Chin Chin, the Chinese Detective.
465 The Actor Detective.
440 The High Horse of the Pacific.
423 The Lone Hand; or, The Red River Recreants.
408 Doc Grip, the Vendetta of Death.
381 The Gypsy Gentleman; or, Nick Fox, Detective.
376 Black Beards; or, The Rio Grande High Horse.
370 The Dusky Detective; or, Pursued to the End.
363 Crowningshield, the Detective.
330 The Genteel Spotter; or, The N. Y. Night Hawk.
252 The Wall Street Blood; or, The Telegraph Girl.
203 The Double Detective; or, The Midnight Mystery.
196 La Marmoset, the Detective Queen.
101 The Man from New York.
91 The Winning Oar; or, The Innkeeper's Daughter.
84 Hunted Down; or, The League of Three.
81 The Human Tiger; or, A Heart of Fire.
75 Gentleman George; or, Parlor, Prison and Street.
72 The Phantom Hand; or, The 5th Avenue Heiress.
63 The Winged Whale; or, The Red Rupert of Gulf.
59 The Man from Texas; or, The Arkansas Outlaw.
56 The Indian Mazeppa; or, Madman of the Plains.
49 The Wolf Demon; or, The Kanawha Queen.
42 The California Detective; or, The Witches of N.Y.
31 The New York Sharp; or, The Flash of Lightning.
27 The Spotter Detective; or, Girls of New York.

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